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Before You Read...

Oh my goodness! Hello, everyone!

Welcome to the fifth book (WHAT!?!?) of my Warrior Cats fanfiction series - Warriors: Kittypet Clanborn. I still think that it is so surreal that after first starting this series when I was in middle school, I'm still carrying this on, but I could not be happier for deciding to do so!

To be honest, I feel like in almost every Warriors arc that I have read, the fifth book out of the six is the most intense (even more so than the sixth book), and I hope to live up to that expectation. I already have a whoooolllleee list of plot lines for this book that I am going to use, and I am SO EXCITED!

Anyway, that's it! I hope that you all enjoy! And...

~ may StarClan light your path ~

- warriorcatlover345

P.S. I will be using some original plot lines (and characters, obviously) from the main Warrior Cats series. I am not claiming them as my own, nor the characters!

Allegiances

THUNDERCLAN

LEADER Firestar—ginger tom with a flame-colored pelt
DEPUTY Brambleclaw—dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes
MEDICINE CAT Jayfeather—gray tabby tom with blind blue eyes

WARRIORS (toms, and she-cats without kits)

Graystripe—long-haired gray tom

Dustpelt—dark brown tabby tom

Sandstorm—pale ginger she-cat with green eyes

Brackenfur—golden brown tabby tom

Sorreltail—tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat with amber eyes

Cloudtail—long-haired white tom with blue eyes

Brightheart—white she-cat with ginger patches

Millie—striped gray tabby she-cat

Thornclaw—golden brown tabby tom

Squirrelflight—dark ginger she-cat with green eyes

Leafpool—light brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes, former medicine cat

Lilypetal—brown tabby-and-white she-cat with hazel eyes

Goldenshine—golden brown tabby she-cat with gray eyes

Mistpelt—fluffy gray and white she-cat with blue eyes

Dustystorm—gray tom (with light gray flecks) and pale blue eyes

Nightwing—sleek black she-cat with green eyes

Spiderleg—long-limbed black tom with brown underbelly and amber eyes

Birchfall—light brown tabby tom

Whitewing—white she-cat with green eyes

Berrynose—cream-colored tom

Hazeltail—small gray-and-white she-cat

Mousewhisker—gray-and-white tom

Hollyleaf—black she-cat with green eyes

Cinderheart—gray tabby she-cat
Apprentice, Ivypaw

Lionblaze—golden tabby tom with amber eyes
Apprentice, Dovepaw

Foxleap—reddish tabby tom
Apprentice, Swiftpaw

Icecloud—white she-cat
Apprentice, Snowpaw

Toadstep—black-and-white tom

Rosepetal—dark cream she-cat

Briarlight—dark brown she-cat

Blossomfall—tortoiseshell-and-white she-cat

Bumblestripe—very pale gray tom with black stripes

APPRENTICES (more than six moons old, training to become warriors)

Dovepaw—pale gray she-cat with green eyes

Ivypaw—silver-and-white tabby she-cat with dark blue eyes

Swiftpaw—gray-black tom (with a white chest and paws) with gray-blue eyes

Snowpaw—white she-cat (with gray ears and paws) with blue eyes

QUEENS (she-cats expecting or nursing kits)

Ferncloud—pale gray (with darker flecks) she-cat with green eyes

Daisy—cream long-furred cat from the horseplace

Poppyfrost—tortoiseshell she-cat (mother to Cherrykit, a ginger she-cat, and Molekit, a brown-and-cream tom)

ELDERS (former warriors and queens, now retired)

Mousefur—small dusky brown she-cat

Purdy—plump tabby former loner with a gray muzzle

SHADOWCLAN

LEADER Blackstar—large white tom with huge jet-black paws
DEPUTY Rowanclaw—ginger tom
MEDICINE CAT(S) Littlecloud—very small tabby tom
Apprentice, Flametail (ginger tom)

WARRIORS

Oakfur—small brown tom
Apprentice, Ferretpaw (cream-and-gray tom)

Smokefoot—black tom

Toadfoot—dark brown tom

Applefur—mottled brown she-cat

Crowfrost—black-and-white tom

Ratscar—brown tom with long scar across his back

Apprentice, Pinepaw (black she-cat)

Snowbird—pure-white she-cat

Tawnypelt—tortoiseshell she-cat with green eyes
Apprentice, Starlingpaw (ginger tom)

Olivenose—tortoiseshell she-cat

Owlclaw—light brown tabby tom

Shrewfoot—gray she-cat with black feet

Scorchfur—dark gray tom

Redwillow—mottled brown-and-ginger tom

Tigerheart—dark brown tabby tom

Dawnpelt—cream-furred she-cat

QUEENS

Kinkfur—tabby she-cat, with long fur that sticks out at all angles

Ivytail—black, white, and tortoiseshell she-cat

ELDERS

Cedarheart—dark gray tom

Tallpoppy—long-legged light brown tabby she-cat

Snaketail—dark brown tom with a tabby-striped tail

Whitewater—white she cat with long fur, blind in one eye

WINDCLAN

LEADER Onestar—brown tabby tom
DEPUTY Ashfoot—gray she-cat
MEDICINE CAT Kestrelflight—mottled gray tom

WARRIORS

Crowfeather—dark gray tom

Owlwhisker—light brown tabby tom
Apprentice, Whiskerpaw (light brown tom)

Whitetail—small white she-cat

Nightcloud—black she-cat

Gorsetail—very pale gray-and-white she-cat with blue eyes

Weaselfur—ginger tom with white paws

Harespring—brown-and-white tom

Leaftail—dark brown tabby tom with amber eyes

Antpelt—brown tom with one black ear

Emberfoot—gray tom with two dark paws

Heathertail—light brown tabby she-cat with blue eyes
Apprentice, Furzepaw (gray-and-white she-cat)

Breezepelt—black tom with amber eyes
Apprentice, Boulderpaw (large pale gray tom)

Sedgewhisker—light brown tabby she-cat

Swallowtail—dark gray she-cat

Sunstrike—tortoiseshell she-cat with large white mark on her forehead

ELDERS

Webfoot—dark gray tabby tom

Tornear—tabby tom

RIVERCLAN

LEADER Mistystar—gray she-cat with blue eyes
DEPUTY Reedwhisker—black tom
Apprentice, Hollowpaw (dark brown tabby tom)
MEDICINE CAT(S) Mothwing—dappled golden she-cat
Apprentice, Willowshine (gray tabby she-cat)

WARRIORS

Graymist—pale gray tabby she-cat
Apprentice, Troutpaw (pale gray tabby she-cat)

Mintfur—light gray tabby tom

Icewing—white she-cat with blue eyes

Minnowtail—dark gray she-cat
Apprentice, Mossypaw (brown-and-cream she-cat)

Pebblefoot—mottled gray tom
Apprentice, Rushpaw (light brown tabby tom)

Mallownose—light brown tabby tom

Robinwing—tortoiseshell-and-white tom

Beetlewhisker—brown-and-white tabby tom

Petalfur—gray-and-white she-cat

Grasspelt—light brown tom

QUEENS

Duskfur—brown tabby she-cat

Mosspelt—tortoiseshell she-cat with blue eyes

ELDERS

Dapplenose—mottled gray she-cat

Pouncetail—ginger-and-white tom

Prologue

[image]

A full moon was shining in the center of the navy, star-flitted sky as ThunderClan traveled through the forest, returning from the traditional Gathering between the four Clans around the lake.

Jayfeather, the ThunderClan medicine cat, was trailing just behind Firestar, the ThunderClan leader, and Brambleclaw, the ThunderClan deputy, also the cat that Jayfeather had known as his father until just a few moons ago.

Thanks to Hollyleaf, now all four Clans know that we were lied to, and lied about for our whole lives, the gray tabby tom thought bitterly as he crawled through the camp entrance and into the clearing.

Jayfeather tried to forget about the night that his sister had proclaimed to all of the Clans that Brambleclaw and Squirrelflight weren't really their, along with their brother Lionblaze's, parents. He hadn't been able to actually see even one reaction, but the amount of shock and disbelief that had rippled in that clearing had managed to overtake his own dismay.

Leafpool, Jayfeather's real mother, had withdrawn from her medicine cat duties because of her faults. *She deserved it,* Jayfeather told himself. But it had been overwhelming for Jayfeather to think that he was going to be the only medicine cat in ThunderClan.

But, luckily, his immense feelings of stress hadn't latest long at all.

Jayfeather yawned as he finally reached the medicine den, proceeding to crawl inside. Almost immediately, he shut his eyes as the sweet scent of the other cat in the den flooded through his nostrils. He could hear the shuffles of leaves a few tail-lengths in front of him, so he assumed that she was organizing the herb stocks.

You can always count on her to make sure that there's not even one leaf or berry out of place, Jayfeather thought fondly as he padded up to

sit next to his apprentice. "Hey, Snowflight," he whispered, aware that outside of their den, the clearing was beginning to fall silent as cats went to their dens to sleep.

"Hey!" Jayfeather heard Snowflight purr as he felt a wave of excitement exude from her pelt. "Did anything interesting happen while I was gone?"

Jayfeather thought for a moment as he recalled the small bit of time that he hadn't been with Snowflight as they were returning from the Gathering. She had run ahead to the ThunderClan camp to check on her sister, Goldenshine, who had given birth to her kit just earlier.

"Nope," he answered, shaking his head. "Most cats were just talking about the situation with the drought, and the journey that the leaders are going to send some warriors on." *And thank StarClan for that!*

"Oh, right!" Snowflight exclaimed as she sniffed at one of the piles. "Who do you think Firestar will send?"

Jayfeather had been asking himself that same question since the Gathering, wondering which two cats that Firestar would trust the most to do something as big as to bring back the water. Brambleclaw, Sandstorm... or Squirrelflight, surely? "Definitely stronger warriors, I can say that for sure," he guessed, shrugging. "Luckily Firestar has many good options."

From Snowflight's eagerness, Jayfeather could tell that his apprentice was nodding in agreement. "Thanks to us, they'll be able to become even stronger!" she purred as she turned back to her herbs.

Jayfeather then sighed, shifting slightly closer to Snowflight as he began to help her sort through everything. Even though he never showed it, he was extremely grateful for and admired Snowflight's dedication and enthusiasm. She was always so forbearing, and was never phased by Jayfeather's impatience. Their ways of working seemed to complete each other, and had since Snowflight had become his apprentice eight moons ago.

Jayfeather couldn't see the white she-cat, but her gentleness, her soft voice, and her kindness always made his heart beat at double the speed. *But is Snowflight ever going to know that?* Jayfeather asked himself. *No way in the name of StarClan.*

"Hey, is everything okay?"

Jayfeather shook his head quickly as he realized that his former apprentice was speaking to him, concern radiating from her. Once he was fully out of his thoughts, he realized that he had shifted closer to Snowflight, so close that their fur now brushed as they worked. *Great StarClan, get your act together and stop mooning over your own fellow medicine cat!*

"No, no, everything's absolutely fine," Jayfeather stammered, praying to StarClan already that Snowflight wasn't sensing the secret that he was trying so hard to hide.

He sensed Snowflight's uncertainty as she then meowed, "Are you sure? Was I doing something wrong?" Jayfeather then felt himself tensing as Snowflight shifted even closer to him. "Are you okay?"

Get your head out of the clouds, Jayfeather! "No, no... yes, I'm fine," Jayfeather murmured, trying to keep his voice even. "You're... everything was perfect." He then took a deep breath, trying to ignore the precariousness that he felt from Snowflight.

But luckily, whatever more she could have asked was interrupted when Jayfeather's mouth opened into a huge yawn. He tried to push down his own frustration. *It gets worse every single day,* he thought. *I definitely need to go to sleep.*

"How about let's call it a day, Snowflight?" he asked his former apprentice. He then rolled his eyes and muttered, "It's getting late, and if I stay up any later, I'm going to be thinking more irrationally than I already am." Jayfeather then tensed, wondering if Snowflight had heard his latest words.

But if she did, the white she-cat didn't show any indication. "Okay," she replied as Jayfeather heard the rustles of her own moss nest.

Jayfeather then padded over to his own, smashing down some of the more lumpy parts of the moss before settling in and yawning a second time.

He could still hear Snowflight as she tried to get more comfortable in her own nest. "Goodnight," she whispered softly, yawning immediately after.

Sleep well, lovely. "Goodnight," Jayfeather murmured back as he finally lowered his head down and closed his eyes.

The gray tabby tom lied in his nest silently as he awaited sleep to take him away. He expected that in what would feel like just heartbeats, he would open his eyes again to his typical blindness and to the smell of dew in early dawn. So, Jayfeather was a little surprised as his blue eyes opened into sight.

Jayfeather couldn't help but let out a small huff as he rolled his eyes. *Foxdung, what now?* he asked himself, lashing his tail irritably. *Another prophecy, maybe? More trouble?* As much as the medicine cat was dedicated to sharing dreams with his warrior ancestors, lately, any new messages that he was given only seemed to bring signs of coming issues.

But Jayfeather already knew that this was different. This wasn't StarClan he was looking around in, rather, it was ThunderClan's territory. He then flicked his ears as he suddenly heard many yowls and screeches rise around him, ones of determination and pain. *This is a battle,* Jayfeather realized.

Immediately in front of Jayfeather were two cats standing face to face, both of them with their fur bristled out to make them look twice their size and their claws unsheathed.

One of them, to Jayfeather's surprise, was Ashfur.

Ashfur?! Jayfeather thought in disbelief. *What in the name of StarClan is he doing here? Lilypetal chased him out moons ago!*

Jayfeather then averted his gaze to the she-cat that Ashfur was facing. Jayfeather's heart nearly stopped as he realized that she

looked very familiar in some way. It was something about her pale blue eyes. She was pure white, except for her ear-tips and paws that were gray. Her eyes were blazed with anger.

Who is that? Jayfeather wondered as he observed the she-cat. *Why do I almost seem to recognize her?*

Jayfeather found that he was utterly confused, but before he could process the scene in front of him anymore, he was then taken to another part of ThunderClan's forest, and it was raining.

For just a few heartbeats, the clearing was empty. So, when Jayfeather saw movement from some bushes, he couldn't help but flinch slightly. But he was instantly calm as he recognized Snowflight emerging from the brambles. He tilted his head with worry and curiosity as he noticed that his apprentice looked fairly dismayed, her paws dragging against the sodden earth as she traveled.

Jayfeather watched her as his heart welled up with sympathy. *Have I ever seen Snowflight sad?* Jayfeather wondered. *Well, no, but has she ever been sad?*
Something must be very wrong.

He found that he couldn't take his eyes off of her, not only because of his concern, but as he admired her brilliant blue eyes and face features. In fact, he was so distracted that Jayfeather didn't notice the shadow of another cat making its way towards Snowflight until the dream flashed again.

What's happening? Jayfeather thought as his heart began to beat faster. *Who was that, and why were they creeping up on Snowflight? I'll flay that mouse-brain!*

Jayfeather's next vision didn't ease him any less though.

Not at all, in fact.

The next image that Jayfeather saw absolutely horrified him. So much that he wished that he could fall back into his blindness.

It was the bloody body of his own apprentice, Snowflight, lying in a

patch of grass as rain pelted down on her fur.

"No!" Jayfeather yowled, his voice suddenly thick with emotion as he tried to run over to the she-cat. "Snowflight, don't leave me!"

Then, before Jayfeather could take another pawstep, his eyes flew open, and he was blind again.

He had escaped his dream, but he found that he was still panting and his heart was beating as if he had actually ran. And the dream still felt as horrifying as it could have been if it were real.

Jayfeather practically leaped up from his nest, whipping his head around and trying to search for signs that Snowflight was still in the den with him.

Oh, StarClan. Please, please, let that have been a bad dream! Jayfeather pleaded to his ancestors. *Please let Snowflight still be in here with me, don't take her away from me now!* "Snowflight!" Jayfeather called out. "Snowflight, where are you?"

Jayfeather then couldn't help but feel an overwhelming wave of relief as he recognized Snowflight's voice, coming from the same place she had fallen asleep in. In fact, she was purring with amusement as she meowed, "I'm right here, Jayfeather!" He then heard her nest ruffle, and he assumed that she was standing up.

Jayfeather let out a sigh as he turned to face Snowflight. "Thank StarClan!" he breathed, letting his head fall to the ground. *It was just a bad dream. It must've been!*

Jayfeather then heard Snowflight let out another purr. "Why did you need confirmation of that?" she whispered, padding up closer so that Jayfeather could smell her sweet scent. "What's wrong, Jayfeather? You can tell me."

No, I can't.

Jayfeather shook his head as he faced Snowflight. "Nothing. Just forget it," he muttered, almost trying to tell himself that more than the white she-cat. "Well, now I'm wide awake. I'm going to finish off what we started at moonhigh." *Anything to forget the things I just*

saw...

Jayfeather then padded over to the half-organized herb stocks, taking a deep breath as he bent his head down to sniff them. As he then began to rearrange and see what needed restocking, he reflected on what he had seen.

I'm praying to StarClan that Snowflight walking alone in the forest and... and... was all just a horrible, nightmarish figment of my imagination... Jayfeather thought worriedly. *But what about the first image? Who was that cat facing off with Ashfur?*

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

What in the name of StarClan?

Snowpaw watched in utter dubiety as she looked at the scene in front of her. She was dreaming, but that didn't mean that she wasn't going to acknowledge the strange, off-putting images that she was seeing.

She was currently sitting in what she recognized to be the ThunderClan medicine den. She was standing in front of many piles of herbs, her own paws moving as if she knew exactly what each herb was and where it needed to go.

But I don't*, though!* Snowpaw thought frustratedly. *How can I? I know all of these things about being a medicine cat, and only StarClan knows why!*

Snowpaw then was startled as a couple more images almost simultaneously appeared in front of her - one of the rainy forest as she trudged through the sodden earth, and another of her sitting out in the ThunderClan camp clearing on a sunny day as she stared at the medicine den from the outside.

The young apprentice was so confused that she almost tried to open her eyes in order to force herself out of this weird dream. *I have no idea what is going on!* Snowpaw thought. *I wouldn't think twice if I saw these images in a dream once, but I see this almost every night!*

Then, Snowpaw gasped, not sure if it would be heard in the waking

world as a completely new image flashed in her dream - images of darkness and of cats leaping into battle. Snowpaw could almost hear the screeches and the slicing of claws against skin and fur.

Snowpaw watched in horror before turning slightly to see a cat, his blue eyes full of evil and malice, staring back at her. Her ears flattened as she was overwhelmed with intimidation. *Who is that?* She wondered fearfully as her tail twitched anxiously. *He looks scary! StarClan, take me out of this, please! I don't want to fight him!*

StarClan almost seemed to answer the white she-cat's prayers as her dream then flashed again, but to Snowpaw's dismay, what had come next wasn't any better. She was in a full-on wrestle with another cat, and she couldn't suppress a squeal of pain as it sank his claws into her shoulders.

Great StarClan, this definitely isn't play-fighting! Snowpaw realized fearfully. *This cat has something to prove, that's for sure!*

Snowpaw knew that this was a dream, but nevertheless, she wasn't going to wake up telling herself that she had lost a fight in a *dream*. So, using all of her strength, Snowpaw managed to heave herself forward so that she could pin down her opponent. *Gotcha!*

But, as Snowpaw let all of her weight fall onto the cat she had pinned down, she let out a horrified gasp as she immediately recognized the tom below her.

Swiftpaw!

Except here, he looked stronger and a bit older, a warrior *at least*.

Before Snowpaw could leap off of the gray-black tom and ask why he was fighting her, Snowpaw's eyes suddenly flew open, and she was back in the apprentices den.

Snowpaw let out a shaky sigh as she lifted up her head, turning it towards the den entrance. *I woke up early!* Snowpaw thought as could just barely see the moon, still fairly up high in the sky. *Time to get some more sleep!*

As Snowpaw then laid her head back down in her nest, her eyes

widened as her sleepy gaze fell on Swiftpaw, who was sleeping in his own nest just a few tail-lengths away. Her wide eyes almost immediately turned into narrow slits as she watched the slow rises and falls of her fellow apprentice's flank.

Could I have been mistaken? Snowpaw asked herself as she reflected on her very vivid dream. *Maybe it wasn't even him. Swiftpaw and I would never argue, let alone actually get into a physical battle! Swiftpaw is certainly a tough young cat, but he would never fight me outside of training!*

Snowpaw let out a sigh as she finally let her eyes close, trying to push down the extreme apprehension she felt. *Surely I don't have to be afraid of my best friend, right?*

Chapter 1

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

"Well, Lilypetal, you were right," Jayfeather muttered as he stepped away from my flank. "You're expecting kits."

Oh my StarClan!

I gasped, whipping my head up to look at Thornclaw, who was sitting next to me in the medicine den. His pale blue eyes reflected the same bewilderment that I felt, and his mouth had dropped open. I tried to suppress a purr of amusement as I noticed that he had fallen speechless.

It was a few moments before my mate could manage to get any words out. "Kits..." Thornclaw finally breathed, slowly turning so that he could meet my gaze. My stomach twisted up into the most wonderfully created and best-feeling knot as I saw love glowing in the tabby tom's eyes. "Our second litter of kits."

"Our second litter of kits..." I repeated as I stood up, the surprise that I was feeling slowly being replaced by excitement. "Our second litter of kits!" *I'm going to be a mother... again!*

I turned to Jayfeather once again, one of my eyebrows raised as I met the medicine cat's blind blue gaze. "Are you completely sure?" I murmured, trying to push down my purrs. *Please be sure, please be sure!*

I watched as Jayfeather simply shrugged. "Unless you decided to swallow a few huge rocks and store them in your stomach, yes," he murmured sarcastically, lashing his tail.

I then turned back to Thornclaw as I could clearly hear the loud purr rumbling in his throat. "Well, these are the best type of rocks that I could ever imagine!" he exclaimed as he dug his muzzle into

my neck fur. "I'm so happy, Lilypetal."

I purred back as I put my muzzle on my mate's head. "I am too, Thornclaw," I whispered, breathing in Thornclaw's warm scent. Licking my mate's head, I then pulled away to look at Jayfeather again, my tail twitching with excitement. "Thank you, Jayfeather!"

The gray tabby tom rolled his eyes. "Always happy to give the news that there's going to be more *kits* in the camp..."

Thornclaw and I exchanged an amused glance before turning around and leaving the medicine den side by side. I took a deep breath as I crawled through the den entrance first, beginning to process what in the name of StarClan had just happened.

I was having my second litter of kits, in case that wasn't established enough already. It was definitely a surprise, but the best type of surprise I could have ever imagined. A part of me, of course, was grieving a bit for having to step down from my warriors duties for quite a few moons while I cared for the little ones, but if I was going to do it for any reason, it would be to do that.

I already couldn't wait to snuggle with them in the nest we shared, to see what they looked like and how they acted, watching them grow up, and heck, even just getting to see how many kits Thornclaw and I were going to have!

The excitement of all of it almost felt as if it was for the first time. I still felt that strange but amazing mix of anticipation, nerves, and eagerness.

And extreme nausea, but we won't talk about that.

Expecting Goldenshine and Snowflight feels so long ago... I realized, pushing back strong emotion as I was brought back to having my two daughters with me in the nursery, my heart welling up with love each time I did something as little as look at them.

I had been so heartbroken to watch the two of them leave the nursery, but I realized almost immediately after that getting to watch them grow up was hard, but almost just as enjoyable as

getting to be with them as kits.

And, just as I had expected, both Snowflight and Goldenshine grew up to be strong, determined, and beautiful grown she-cats. Goldenshine was so defiant and brave, but also so considerate of her Clanmates. And Snowflight had been such a brilliant medicine cat alongside Jayfeather, her intelligence and grace showing even through her extreme humility and generosity.

But she was gone too soon... I thought, trying to push down emotion as I thought about my daughter, who had been killed by Ashfur, a ThunderClan exile. *If I had gotten my claws on that gray flea-pelt, I would have hurt him so badly that his spirit would still feel pain from the wounds that I gave him.*

It was mainly because of that fox-hearted gray-speckled tom that I would never truly find peace with my daughter's death. Yes, Goldenshine had killed him immediately after he had killed Snowflight, but he was still a danger to my family, to my complete dismay.

Through things I had seen, and even from hearing directly from the crowfood-eating mouse-brain, I knew that Ashfur was far from finished from his revenge for me being the one to have him exiled from ThunderClan.

Even though I would always stand by my choice of announcing at a full-moon Gathering of the things that Ashfur had done, such as threatening Leafpool's three kits and attempting to kill Firestar, I couldn't help but want to shred a tree to pieces with my bare claws, so frustrated and overwhelmed with grief with all he had done to try and hurt Squirrelflight, and to try and hurt me.

Now, he was training Swiftpaw, Goldenshine's son, in the Dark Forest. As much as I wanted to pull my daughter's kit out of there, Ashfur had threatened to kill Swiftpaw if I said a word. Thornclaw, who'd been unaware of this, had tried to tell Swiftpaw that he shouldn't be training there so young. Ashfur had tried to kill him too.

Thornclaw had lived, thank StarClan, but just barely.

And Swiftpaw was still training in the Dark Forest.

So, as much as I hated to admit it, Ashfur was still a major threat, and what was worse... was that there wasn't anything that I could do to stop him now.

I took a deep breath as I began drowning in my fearful thoughts. *Exactly, there isn't anything you know of that can stop him right now,,* I told myself as I then looked down at my own belly. *And you will find something, but all you can do for now is pray to StarClan that Ashfur isn't going to lay even one claw on these new kits. But even if StarClan was powerless,* I *wouldn't let him.*

Luckily, even just the brief thought of my new kits managed to push away my worries.

And it was Thornclaw's purr of amusement that finally brought me all the way back to reality as we settled down just a little ways away from the medicine den. It was then that I realized that I had let out another excited squeal without knowing that I did.

Thornclaw continued to purr as he lightly nudged me on the shoulder. "Well, this is the best possible result you could've gotten, huh?" my mate meowed, his eyes glimmering with happiness and relief. "I hated to see you suffering so much... all of those pains you were having."

I sighed as I touched my muzzle to Thornclaw's cheek. "You and me both!" I meowed exasperatedly as I thought about the almost constant cramps and spasms I had been having over the past day.

After I had returned with Dustystorm and Nightwing after saying their goodbyes to Smudge and Jerry, the cramps that I had felt on the way back did not stop. I had barely been able to sleep last night, and at dawn Thornclaw had practically begged for me to go to the medicine den. *And I'm sure glad that we did!* I thought joyfully. *Because I found out some of the best news that I have ever received!*

"I have a question," Thornclaw murmured after I had spoken, his eyes narrowed as they gleamed with humor.

I reflected my mate's gaze. "Well, maybe I'll have an answer for you," I meowed as I purred with amusement.

For a few heartbeats, Thornclaw didn't speak as he stared back at me, and I found that my mind was beginning to well up with curiosity. "What?" I demanded as I continued to purr, nudging Thornclaw lightly.

I flicked my ears as Thornclaw finally spoke. "Well, I mean, I have to ask..." he meowed, letting his eyes flit around the camp as they still glowed with humor. As his gaze fell on me again, he then whispered, "Are these mine?"

"Thornclaw!" I exclaimed, softly batting him across the face with one of my paws. "Of course they're yours! What do you mean?"

Thornclaw shrugged, a huge smirk still on his face. "I'm just saying," he muttered as he nodded his head towards the forest. "Wouldn't it be so delightful for *that tom* to have a bunch of baby Jerrys hopping around the nursery?"

I let out a gasp as I stared back at my mate with wide eyes. "Thornclaw, Great StarClan!" I exclaimed as I tried to actually suppress a bit of anger as Jerry's name was brought up. "Come on, you remember that you are the only tom that I'll ever love, for goodness sake!"

"And I know that," Thornclaw meowed softly, touching his muzzle to mine. "I was just joking, my love."

I took another deep breath, closing my eyes as Thornclaw's muzzle touched mine. "I know, I'm sorry," I whispered back, trying to push away the slight grudge that I still felt against the dark-ginger kittypet who had managed to make Thornclaw so jealous because of his persistence towards me, and who had even managed to get my loyalty to ThunderClan questioned. *But that's all over,* I told myself. *And now Thornclaw and I are as close and in love as we have ever been.*

"There's no need to be sorry," Thornclaw purred as he pulled his muzzle away, his gaze warm. "I'm sorry that I teased. But anyway, let's forget about that."

My stomach then filled up with butterflies as Thornclaw shifted closer to me and wrapped his tail around my back. "Let's talk about these legendary kits that are going to see the light of day soon," he purred, running his tail down my belly.

"Oh my StarClan, I can't wait!" I exclaimed, looking down at my belly that was only beginning to swell. "I'm going to mother these kits so well that their kits will feel extremely mothered!"

"Oh, yeah?" Thornclaw purred as he looked into my eyes. "I am going to father these kits so well that their kits' kits will feel extremely fathered!"

Thornclaw and I then let out *mrrows* of laughter before I leaned my head on my mate's shoulder. "Great StarClan, the two of us together still act like kits sometimes, don't we?"

Thornclaw laid his muzzle on my head as another purr rumbled in his throat. "And that's one reason why being with you makes me so happy."

"Eh, I suppose you make me feel pretty good," I meowed teasingly as I shrugged.

I then watched as Thornclaw rolled his eyes. "Oh, please!" he purred before his gaze was then overcome with concern. "But anyway, shouldn't you be moving to the nursery now?"

I tilted my head to the side as I realized that I hadn't even thought about when I would move to the nursery. *Do I need to just yet?* I asked myself as I glanced back down at my belly. Besides these pains and some huge urges to puke every once in a while, I felt energized and well enough to continue on with my duties.

So, I verbalized this to Thornclaw. "I will soon!" I reassured my mate. "But these kits shouldn't be coming for another moon plus a couple more quarter moons!"

"And your point is?" Thornclaw meowed, one of his eyebrows raising as he tilted his head to the side.

Stop being cute so that I can tell you, I thought to myself before

continuing. "I won't be having these kits for a little while!" I insisted, lashing my tail towards the Highledge. "I want to be able to serve my Clan as long as possible."

Thornclaw sighed, rolling his pale blue eyes. "I figured you would say that," he murmured, touching his nose to mine. He then pulled away, his eyes glowing with concern and love. "But at least take it easy, okay? I don't want you to push yourself if you're tired or hurting."

I dipped my head to Thornclaw. "Don't worry, I won't," I meowed. "I am aware that there are kits in my belly, but I want to be able to help in whatever way I-" I then let out a hiss as a spasm shot through my side, and I fell against Thornclaw's shoulder as I felt I couldn't hold myself up for just a heartbeat.

Thornclaw took my weight and wrapped his tail around my back once again. I looked back up to see my mate's face full of skepticism and a bit of humor.

"You were saying?" Thornclaw then muttered, his eyes narrowing.

I rolled my eyes as I purred, "Alright fine, today is a bit of a rough day," I admitted, actually being able to stand up. "But there are always some difficult waves at the very beginning!"

"Mhm," Thornclaw murmured as he nodded slowly, his eyes full of a mix of humor, affection, and doubt. "And hedgehogs fly."

"Sure they do! Even if they're in a little pain!" I purred as I kneaded my paws eagerly. And as Thornclaw let out a *mrrow* of laughter, I shook out my fur and sat back down. "Okay, here's a compromise - I rest today, and go to the nursery in a few quarter moons."

"A few quarter moons late if you ask me," Thornclaw teased as he nudged me on the shoulder once again. He then let out a huff and touched his muzzle to my cheek. "Fine. But if I see any signs that you'e not feeling well, I'll drag you by the tail into the nursery!"

After purring with amusement, I nodded to my mate. "We have a deal," I meowed. "I think... we could do without the dragging part."

"Alright, I can probably take out that piece!"

I then gasped and flicked my ears as I realized something. "Oh my StarClan, Thornclaw! We're having kits!" I exclaimed.

Thornclaw stared back at me, his eyes gleaming as he purred. "I am aware!" he laughed. "Is that all you needed to say?"

"That's precisely it!" I exclaimed. "There's *more* to say! I need to tell Mistpelt! Goldenshine, Squirrelflight, Whitewing..." *Oh, I can't wait to tell them! News is almost double as exciting when you get to share it with those you care about!*

Thornclaw then nodded eagerly, but before he could say anything else, Brambleclaw's voice came from the camp entrance.

"Hunting patrol! Could I have Thornclaw, Lilypetal, Nightwing and Brightheart?"

I had stared at the ThunderClan deputy as he spoke before turning back to Thornclaw, who was giving me a questioning look through narrowed eyes.

I rolled my eyes. "Don't worry, I'm resting!" I reassured the golden tabby as I let out a sigh.

Thornclaw's eyes then flashed with sympathy. "Hey, all of the rest will be worth it in the end, right?" he purred, nodding down to my belly.

As I thought about Thornclaw's words, I was suddenly overwhelmed with love. *Definitely. I said it with Snowflight and Goldenshine and I'l say it now. I want to help my Clan, but I would throw myself in the nursery for my whole life if it meant that my kits would come out healthy and happy.*

As I nodded, Thornclaw took another glance towards the camp entrance where the hunting patrol was beginning to gather. He then turned back towards me. "Alright, I guess I am off," he murmured sadly. "I'll tell Brambleclaw that you need to stay back this time."

"Thank you," I purred, looking back at my mate as I was overcome

with gratitude.

"I'll come and be with you as soon as I get back," Thornclaw insisted. He then winked as he meowed, "And I'll bring you your favorite!"

I gasped, my eyes widening. "Mouse?"

Thornclaw nodded as he pressed his muzzle against mine. "Of course."

I pressed back, taking in my mate's scent one last time before I knew he would leave. "I love you. I'll see you later."

"I love you too," Thornclaw purred as he then turned around the begin padding away. I then tilted my head as he paused for a brief moment and turned his head around. "Be a good hedgehog!" he called.

I howled with laughter before calling back, "As long as I know you're bringing me that mouse, I'll be just fine!"

Thornclaw purred with amusement before giving me one more look of affection and running over to join the convening hunting patrol.

I sighed as I watched my mate go, then proceeding to narrow my eyes and glance around camp. *Resting doesn't necessarily mean lying down, right?* I asked myself. *I'll settle down in a little while. For now, I want to tell some cats the news!*

I continued looking around, trying to catch the familiar fluffy gray and white pelt of my mother, Mistpelt, knowing for sure that I wanted to tell her first.

Luckily, almost immediately I saw her near the Highledge sharing tongues with Sandstorm. *Here we go!* I thought excitedly. *The secret is going to be out!*

I took a deep breath and began to trot over the two she-cats, so eager to tell the only kin that I knew of that she was about to have more.

Chapter 2

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

"Hi, there!" Mistpelt was purring as I padded up to her and Sandstorm.

I dipped my head to the two she-cats. "Hi!" I purred back as I sat down in front of them. I took a deep breath, trying to decide where I even wanted to begin. *This is the first time I've ever outwardly told a cat besides Thornclaw that I'm having kits!* I realized nervously. The first time I had been expecting kits, every cat in ThunderClan seemed to know before I did, if I was being honest.

Sandstorm seemed to sense the seriousness of what I wanted to say, standing up and nodding her head to Mistpelt and me. "I'll let you two talk," she meowed kindly before padding off to join Firestar, who was speaking with Graystripe near the Highledge.

Mistpelt watched her old friend go before turning her pale blue gaze to me. "Come! Sit down," she insisted, beckoning me over with her tail. Once I had settled down beside her, I felt her gaze burn into my cheek as I continued to look for words. "Lilypetal, what's going on?"

Deciding that I wanted to tease my mother a bit, I sniffed and met her gaze with narrowed eyes. "What makes you think that something is going on?" I murmured, tilting my head.

Mistpelt reflected my gaze as it looked like she was trying to suppress a purr of amusement. "Hm, well, you look like something is on your mind," she answered before nudging me on the shoulder with her own. "And your eyes are glittering as if you've had just a little too much catmint."

I gasped and dropped my mouth open, pretending to be offended. "Excuse me!" I exclaimed while purring. "Well, I mean, when you're

expecting kits, you're ought to look overwhelmed with happiness!" *Smooth, Lilypetal. Smooth.*

I let out *mrrow* of laughter as Mistpelt's eyes then looked as if they were about to pop out of her head. "What?!" she yowled, springing up from where she had been lying down. "Lilypetal, are you serious?"

I nodded eagerly, watching as Mistpelt took a deep breath and lied back down. "I am completely serious," I meowed, my voice shaking with emotion. "I'm expecting another litter with Thornclaw."

There was no mistaking the loud purr that was rumbling in Mistpelt's throat. I closed my eyes as my mother touched her muzzle to my cheek, her sweet scent flooding through my nostrils.

To this day, I was still thankful that Thornclaw and I had found Mistpelt out in the ThunderClan forest all those moons ago. *I could've lived my entire life not knowing what love from a mother felt like,* I realized. *If that Twoleg that had taken us had completely succeeded, that could've happened...*

But to my luck, it hadn't, and Mistpelt was as amazing as I had ever imagined my mother being, her only flaw being the fact that she had hidden who my father was from me for moons after she had rejoined ThunderClan. But that was all past. Scourge was my father, but that didn't matter to me; he was gone, and I still had the parent who truly loved me unconditionally.

"Lilypetal, that is so wonderful," Mistpelt then whispered before pulling away to meet my gaze. "I am so happy for you two. When are they due?"

"Not for a while yet!" I answered. "A couple of moons at least, I'm sure."

I then let out another *mrrow* of laughter as Mistpelt let out a squeal like a kit. "*A couple moons at least* can't get here fast enough!" she meowed excitedly. "Oh, I can't wait to see them!" I then tilted my head as Mistpelt let out a snort. "Maybe one of them will look more like you this time!"

My eyes widened as I thought about Mistpelt's comment. What my new kits would look like never really mattered to me - they were always going to be perfect in my eyes. But my mother was right - neither Goldenshine and Snowflight had taken on many of my features, more of Thornclaw's by far. *Which I don't mind at all!* I thought as I pictured Thornclaw, his golden pelt, handsome face and blue eyes. *Goldenshine is nearly a copy of her father with the same golden pelt, and Snowflight had his blue eyes.*

I nodded in agreement to Mistpelt's words. "I suppose we'll see!" I purred. "Something that's always so exciting about new kits is seeing who they take after."

"You know something that I always noticed but never even mentioned?" Mistpelt muttered, looking deep in thought. "Snowflight was the spitting image of Frostfur."

I narrowed my eyes as I pried through my mind, trying to recall who Mistpelt was talking about. From the old forest, surely?

I then gasped and flicked my ears as it came to me. "Frostfur was Thornclaw's mother, right?" I exclaimed, lashing my tail. I now was beginning to remember Thornclaw telling me about the white she-cat soon after we had first become friends - her gentleness and kindness, and fierce love for her kits and everyone in ThunderClan. *She sounded wonderful,* I thought to myself sadly. *I wish I had gotten to meet her.*

"Yes, she was," Mistpelt answered to my question. "She had the same build, the pure-white pelt, and blue eyes."

I nodded, having to push down grief for Snowflight for just a moment. Before I could make a comment, Mistpelt went on, her blue eyes flashing as if she had just come to a new thought. "You know what would be really nice?"

I suppressed a purr of amusement as I observed Mistpelt's excitement. "What?" I asked, twitching my tail with curiosity.

I blinked quickly as Mistpelt teasingly flicked her tail near my face. "If one of your new kits had your hazel eyes."

I let out a huff as I purred. Ah, my mysterious hazel eyes. I had always been known for them, in a way. Typically, cats either had green, blue, or amber eyes... so when any cat would meet my gaze, I would usually have to defend my eyes that looked like a mix of dung and leaves. *But they are unique*, I told myself. *And I've been told they're pretty many times. I'm glad I have them. It really would be nice if one of my kits could carry them on.*

I then pricked my ears as I delved deeper into my thoughts. *I've never seen any other cat with hazel eyes like mine, and I know that Scourge didn't have hazel eyes... so, I wonder where I got them?*

I nodded in response to Mistpelt's original comment. "I do too. It would be nice to see someone else with them, for a change!" I replied before tilting my head at my mother. "Do you know where I got mine?"

Mistpelt sighed as she nodded, her eyes glowing as if memories were playing out right in front of her. "Ah, yes. I do," she breathed, her gaze warm. "My mother, Chrysanthemum, had them."

I gasped. "*Your* mother? She had hazel eyes?" I exclaimed, my mouth dropping as I realized that I had never given Mistpelt's parents, my kin, much thought. I knew that they had lived with Mistpelt as loners out in the old forest, just the three of them, and they had been killed by the dogs that Tigerstar sent out, but that was about it. *I really should have asked more about them, after all, they're my kin as well as Mistpelt's!*

"Oh, yes. They were just as beautiful and radiant as yours," Mistpelt meowed softly, as she reminisced about her parents, I was sure. "And you've also probably wondered how Goldenshine got her gray eyes..."

Whoa! "Sparrow, I assume?" I asked, my eyes wide. "Your father?"

Mistpelt purred as she nodded. "You're absolutely right!" she answered, touching her nose to my ear. "Our family carries some interesting traits in our blood, don't we?"

I snorted as I lashed my tail. "We definitely do! But... wow, that's

really neat," I breathed, shaking my head slowly. I then let out another purr of amusement as I poked Mistpelt on the shoulder with my tail. "Great StarClan, now you're getting me even more excited, if that was even possible!"

My words were nearly cut off as my mouth then opened up into a yawn. I shook out my fur before meeting my mother's gaze again. "Anyway," I meowed, touching my nose to Mistpelt's shoulder. "I didn't just come over here to tell you about my soon-to-be-arriving offspring. What's new with you?"

Although I was actually curious, there was some underlying reasoning behind my casual question. I hadn't given it much thought until just a few days ago, since the border battle against ShadowClan, but I had noticed that Mistpelt had been fairly... *lazy*, I could say, for lack of a better term. She hadn't gone on many patrols lately, and she hadn't fought in the ShadowClan battle. *Which happens...* I told myself. *But... she didn't seem willing to go at all. There was a time that she would volunteer for a battle without hesitation.*

I hoped that Mistpelt's answer to my question would indicate something. So, my ears were pricking with curiosity as Mistpelt finally spoke.

"*New* wouldn't be the right word, I suppose..." she murmured, her gaze glowing with a mix of sadness and knowledge of something that hadn't quite hit me yet.

But, as I then reflected on my latest observations, current circumstances, and the tired, wise look in Mistpelt's eyes, I was able to figure out exactly what was going on.

I closed my eyes as I let out a shaky sigh. "You're going to move to the elders den, aren't you?" I whispered, looking back at my mother sadly.

Mistpelt's gaze said it all already. I almost didn't need to hear her answer. "Yes, I am," she whispered back, letting her head fall to the ground. "I talked to Firestar yesterday, and in the next quarter moon I plan to make my nest in there."

"Wow..." I breathed before shaking my head quickly and resting my tail on Mistpelt's shoulder. I tried to tell myself that this didn't need to be a sad thing - not for me, or even Mistpelt either. Yes, my mother was growing old, but she had served ThunderClan for many moons, in the old territory and in the new one.

I sighed once again, running my tail along Mistpelt's spine. "I think that this is great!" I tried to meow more cheerfully. "You deserve the rest." I then purred nudging Mistpelt once again. "Before we know it, my own kits will be apprentices getting rid of your ticks!"

Mistpelt snorted, and I was happy to see that her gaze was brightening. "There's only one part of that concept I like..." Mistpelt murmured, her eyes glinting with humor. "And it's the part about getting rid of my ticks!"

"Hey!" I exclaimed as I noticed movement come from the camp entrance, and I turned my head to see that Brambleclaw's hunting patrol was returning. I couldn't help but purr as I noticed Thornclaw flanking him, a mouse in his mouth. The golden tabby's eyes lit up when his gaze fell on me.

I heard Mistpelt sniff beside me, and I turned back to see that she had also been watching Thornclaw as he returned from the hunt. "Shot in the dark, but that mouse is for you, isn't it?" she teased, her eyes narrowed as she smirked.

I rolled my eyes as Mistpelt joked about Thornclaw's kindness. "Maybe sorta kinda..." I murmured, my heart welling up with love.

I then felt Mistpelt touch her nose to my cheek. "Well, then, you go enjoy it!"

I nodded to Mistpelt as I stood up. "Are you sure you don't want some?" I asked her, gesturing to where Thornclaw was standing near the fresh-kill pile. "I would love to share it with you, if you're hungry."

Mistpelt shook her head before stretching, her mouth opening into a yawn. "Thank you, my dear," she meowed, standing up and touching her nose to mine. "But I'm alright. I'm going to rest these

old bones!"

I let out a snort. "Great StarClan, you may be moving to the elders den soon, but you're not made of twigs yet!" I meowed before dipping my head to Mistpelt. "Sleep well!"

"I urge you to do the same!" Mistpelt insisted, giving me the same concerned, urgent look that Thornclaw had given me when he insisted that I move to the nursery. "Your kitting may be far off, but I don't want you to hurt yourself or those little ones."

I sighed as I looked down at my belly, suddenly feeling like I was going to explode with love. "Don't worry. I'm going to rest as soon as I've eaten!"

Mistpelt and I then nodded to each other in farewell before I turned around and finally padded over to join Thornclaw, who was waiting for me with the mouse still in his jaws.

I shook my head slowly as I touched my nose to my mate's. "You got me my mouse!" I purred as the two of us then settled down. "Thank you!"

I then let out a gasp as Thornclaw dropped the mouse onto the ground, then pushing it out of my reach with his paw. He smirked and narrowed his eyes. "Have you been taking it easy since I left?" he murmured as he tilted his head. He then purred with amusement as I tried to get a grip of the prey with my tail.

My voice was filled with laughter as I spoke. "Thornclaw, for StarClan's sake, all I've done since you left was tell Mistpelt I'm expecting your kits!"

I continued to purr as Thornclaw then sniffed, wrapping his own tail around the mouse. "But you could have done that while simultaneously running at full speed through the forest!" he joked as I continued to try and gently grasp the mouse.

I then let out a huff, letting my tail and head fall to the ground. I sighed and looked up at Thornclaw, trying to give him the most pitiful and innocent look that I could. "But I didn't, Thornclaw! How

could you be so cruel?" I meowed. "Such a mean, terrible bully!"

Thornclaw stared down at me, his eyes glowing with love, humor, and affection before he purred with amusement and dropped the mouse in front of me. "You're fun to tease," he purred, touching his muzzle to my head.

I let out a snort. "If I didn't love you so much, I would've thrown you into the dirtplace for that!" I purred as I bent down to take a bite of the mouse.

As I chewed, I then watched as Thornclaw nodded over to where Mistpelt was crawling into the warriors den. "So, how did she take the news?"

I swallowed my bite of mouse so that I could answered. "Aw, she was so excited!" I answered, lashing my tail happily. I then purred with amusement as I recalled the details of our conversation in my mind. "She also said that she doesn't want our kits to look like you."

Thornclaw flicked his ears as his eyes widened. "What?" he exclaimed, his eyes flashing with confusion and alarm.

"I'm teasing," I purred before telling Thornclaw all about what Mistpelt and I had talked about. Once I had gotten to the part that had been taking place when Thornclaw had arrived back in camp, I took a deep breath as I stared at the ground, not being able to help feeling a little sad all over again. "Mistpelt also told me that she'll be moving to the elders den."

I then watched as Thornclaw tilted his head, his gaze suddenly solemn. "Really?" he whispered, looking back at where my mother had disappeared. He then looked back at me, and I found that his pale blue eyes were now glowing with concern. "How do you feel about that?"

I took a deep breath, leaning my head on Thornclaw's shoulder. "I'm so excited for her, I really am. She deserves the rest," I answered. "But... it's weird, you know?"

Thornclaw rested his muzzle on my head. "I completely

understand," he meowed softly to me. "It almost makes you feel old, doesn't it?"

I lifted up my head, realizing that Thornclaw's words reflected exactly how I felt. "Yeah, it does!" I agreed, nodding slowly. "Great StarClan, time flies." I was nowhere near to actually being old yet, but through all I had been through thus far, it sure did make me feel like I had aged in some form. I had to admit, arriving in ThunderClan felt like countless seasons ago. But in a way, it also felt like just yesterday as well.

Life was certainly weird in that way, especially when you encounter many ups and downs. The whirlwind feels like moons and moons of time as you experience it, but looking back, it always feels like it was just a heartbeat's worth of time.

I shook my head quickly as I fell into these thoughts. *Goodness, you're thinking like you're moving to the elders den yourself!* I thought jokingly. *You're not there yet, calm down!*

I then let out a sigh, almost as if to release these thoughts I was having. *Your future is what matters right now, and that future is pretty abundant with things right now! Your kits are coming soon, and, unfortunately, some adversity to still deal with...* I then suppressed a hiss as thoughts of Ashfur rose up in my head again.

I then looked up at Thornclaw, who was staring ahead as he looked incredibly deep in thought. I simply watched him for a few heartbeats, wondering what he was thinking about.

Thornclaw sighed and turned his head to meet my gaze once again. To my surprise, his eyes were dark. Always being able to read my mate unlike anyone else, I knew that he was thinking exactly what I was.

I took a deep breath before licking Thornclaw's cheek. *We both are fully aware that Ashfur is still in the Dark Forest, along with all of those other evil crowfood-eating mousebrains, training Swiftpaw, and proceeding with his revenge,* I thought worriedly. *Thornclaw tried to stop him once, and he only put himself in danger.*

Thornclaw and I exchanged a knowing, anxious look before I leaned my head back on his shoulder. *I may have a lot ahead of me - more adventures, more discoveries, new kits... but what else will it consist of as long as that flea-pelt is still around?*

Chapter 3

[image]

Goldenshine's POV

A shiver instantly ran down my spine as I fell into consciousness, and found that I was in my nest in the warriors den.

Great StarClan almighty, it's freezing! I thought irritably as I slowly lifted up my head.

Through the slits in the brambles above me, I could just barely see the splashes of purple, pink, and navy up in the sky. Silverpelt was still flitted among the sky, but it wouldn't be for much longer. *Dawn is nearly here.*

Suddenly feeling like I had been thrown into the coldest water in existence, I let out a quiet hiss and pressed myself deeper into Dustystorm's fur. Next to me in the nest we shared, the sandy-gray tom was fast asleep, his flank rising and falling slowly.

My irritated hisses then turned into soft purrs as his scent overcame me. I sighed and closed my eyes once again, letting myself be comforted by my new mate and his warmth.

Dustystorm and I had only been mates for about a quarter moon, but it all felt so right that it felt it had been so much longer than that; like we had just always been together our whole lives. To tell the truth, after meeting him for the first time when he had arrived in ThunderClan camp with Smudge and Nightwing, his sister, I never could have imagined then that we'd spark such a connection.

But now, I could truly say that the morning after the ShadowClan battle, when we confessed our love to each other, was the most amazing moment of my life.

You know, aside from my apprentice ceremony, my warrior ceremony and having Swiftpaw, my son, of course!

Along with becoming mates, Dustystorm and I had decided to share a nest together in the warriors den. Not only did I love getting to curl up with my love every night, but it was nice to have another cat next me to keep me warm, when it was starting to get so hecking cold!

Just as I was about to drift back into sleep, my eyes shot open again as I heard another cat stir. I lifted my head to see that Rosepetal was attempting to pad out of the den as quietly as she could, taking slow but sure steps as she tried not to smash anyone with her paws.

It was then that I realized that I needed to get up as well, remembering that I had been assigned to go on the dawn patrol the moonhigh before.

Well, so much for keeping warm! I thought begrudgingly as I slowly stood up, trying not to wake Dustystorm. I then shook out my fur before beginning to carefully follow Rosepetal out. *Oh, well. I'd do my duties in the most frigid leaf-bare if it meant I was serving my Clan.*

As I was about to crawl out of the warriors den, my eyes fell on where my mother, Lilypetal, was curled up with Thornclaw just a few tail-lengths away. My father's tail was wrapped around Lilypetal's slightly swelling belly.

I couldn't help but pause as I looked back at my parents, letting out a soft sigh as my warming heart took me away from my cold shivers for just a moment.

Lilypetal and Thornclaw had given me the news that Lilypetal was expecting kits just a few days before, and I don't think I could have been more ecstatic for them. To be honest, I had always wondered if I was ever going to get some new kin, and I had actually been severely doubting it up until I heard the announcement.

These kits are going to be my sisters... or brothers! I realized, my ears flicking. *Wow, imagine having a brother, I've never known what that's like! Oh, I can't wait to meet them!*

Still staring lovingly back at my mother and father, I then had to suppress a slight purr of amusement as I thought about the

conversation that Dustystorm and I had had after we were told that Lilypetal was expecting.

"Oh, Dustystorm, I am so excited!" I had purred as I watched Lilypetal and Thornclaw pad off. "More kits! My parents' kits!" I then began to knead my paws into the ground as I let out a squeal.

Dustystorm had purred with amusement at my extreme enthusiasm. "Great StarClan!" he exclaimed, nudging me with his shoulder. "You might as well be expecting your own kits from how happy you are!"

It was then that I had paused in my celebration, as Dustystorm's words processed. For some reason, the thought of expecting kits seemed exciting on the outside, but experiencing it firsthand all over again - actually expecting, and then being taken away from warriors duties... didn't sound appealing to me at all.

I had truly loved bringing up Swiftpaw - snuggling with him in the nursery, talking and playing with him, watching him grow... It had all been wonderful. I loved him more than I had ever thought I was capable of loving.

But... do I want to do that again? I had asked myself. *As much as I am glad Swiftpaw is here and that he is my son, I don't know if I ever want to be a mother again... I never wanted to be one in the first place. I want to serve my Clan as a warrior.*

Dustystorm immediately had noticed my shift in thought, and I looked back at him to see that he was staring back at me, his gaze looking alarmed and concerned.

"*Are* you?" my mate asked, his eyes wide.

I shook my head quickly, almost as if to shake my thoughts away. "Am I what?"

I then noticed Dustystorm's tail begin to twitch. "Expecting kits?"

I gasped, shaking my head quickly. "Goodness, no!" I exclaimed, my voice filled with a mix of shock and humor. "What made you think that?"

"Well, when I mentioned the idea that you were as happy as you would be if you were expecting your own kits, you looked as if I had just told you that a fox was behind you," Dustystorm meowed, his blue eyes big with concern and a bit of humor.

I wonder if Dustystorm has ever thought about kits? I asked myself, finding that I was beginning to grow a little nervous. *What if something inside of him was hoping that I'd say yes?*

I then had taken a deep breath. *Whatever he feels, he's my mate - I have to be honest with him about how I feel.*

I shyly looked down to the ground as I then murmured, "Honestly... I'd rather deal with the fox."

For a moment, I was scared to meet Dustystorm's gaze, but I was overwhelmed with relief as I saw that my mate's eyes were warm. "Oh, yeah?" he meowed softly, shifting himself closer so that our fur brushed.

I nodded slowly as I stared into Dustystorm's eyes. "You know that I love you so much," I continued, twinning my tail with his. "And who knows... maybe one day I'll change my mind... but... but-"

"-but you don't want to have kits right now," Dustystorm finished for me. My stomach then welled up with butterflies as Dustystorm tightened his grip on my tail and rested his muzzle on my head. "Goldenshine, I completely understand."

Oh my StarClan, you're amazing, I thought, overwhelmed with affection as Dustystorm pulled his muzzle away to meet my gaze again. "Dustystorm, are you sure?"

I then was a little surprised to see Dustystorm's eyes flash as he shrugged. "Well... of course I love the idea of having kits and raising them with you," he admitted. "But, the thing is... I love *you* so much too, and I care immensely about what you want. If having kits isn't what you want, then that's not what I want either!"

A loud purr had then rumbled in my throat as I dug my head into Dustystorm's neck fur. "Thank you, Dustystorm," I whispered as I

continued to purr.

"Of course, Goldenshine," Dustystorm whispered back, licking my head. I then pulled away as he let out a purr of amusement. "It's probably best that we don't have kits, anyway. We'd be too good of parents for them to handle!"

That conversation had been just a few days ago. And since then, I had almost felt that a weight had been lifted off of my shoulders. It was one that I didn't realize was even there, but after some thought, I had realized that kits with Dustystorm had been an unconscious worry of mine. I couldn't have been more relieved that it was settled.

I'm so lucky that I decided to be with such a sweetheart, I thought fondly as I crawled out of the warriors den. *Dustystorm wants kits, but he pushed that away for my own sake... Great StarClan, I love him.*

I was immediately pulled away from these thoughts as my gaze fell on the surroundings in front of me.

I gasped as my paws actually somewhat sank into the ground. *Well... that explains why I've felt like an icicle since I've woken up!*

The camp was covered completely with snow. It went just a little past my paws when it came to depth. There wasn't even one bit of green in sight. Icicles even dripped down from the Highledge.

"Wow," I breathed as I padded over to join Rosepetal next to the camp entrance. "Leaf-bare has come a little early, hasn't it?"

"You're telling me!" Rosepetal meowed, nodding to me in greeting as I settled down next to her. She then let out a huff as she batted at the snow with one of her paws. "Just what we need."

"Don't even try to be sarcastic, Rosepetal!" Mousewhisker teased as he trotted up, Hollyleaf behind him. He sat down next to me, his narrowed gaze scanning the snow-filled camp. "An early leaf-bare never shows anything good."

I nodded in agreement to my friend, hating to admit that he was probably right. But not wanting to dwell into all of the horrible

things that *could* come out of an extra-long leaf-bare, I shook my head quickly and stood back up, beginning to lead our patrol out of camp.

"Well, we're not going to just sit around and wait for things to deteriorate, are we?" I called back as I crawled through the gorse tunnel. "Let's go mark our borders, and let the other Clans know that an early leaf-bare isn't going to bring us down!"

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I was purring with amusement as I walked side by side with Hollyleaf, the dawn patrol returning to camp after we had marked all of our borders, and even done a little bit of hunting. *Might as well keep up with the prey before it disappears!*

I was shocked to see that as soon as the camp clearing was in view, many cats were gathered, and Firestar was up on the Highledge.

I gasped and exchanged a confused glance with Hollyleaf. "Did Firestar call a Clan meeting?" I asked the fluffy black she-cat.

Hollyleaf shrugged, quickly padding ahead of me to join the crowd. "Unless they've all convened for a nice chat, I assume so!"

I rolled my eyes at Hollyleaf's sarcasm before following and settling beside her just below the Highledge. Hollyleaf was quite the spunky she-cat, but we had become quite close since we had talked and spent time together stuck in the old tunnels for a night. *I would hope that she would at least like me a bit, considering I tried to save her life!* I thought jokingly.

Mousewhisker sat on my other side as the camp fell silent, and Firestar began to speak. I tilted my head, suddenly very concerned as I noticed that the ThunderClan leader's green eyes were solemn.

"I have bad news," he began, his gaze flitting over the cats in the clearing.

Bad news? My stomach twisted as I awaited for the ginger tom to go on. *It must be pretty bad news if Firestar is announcing it to the whole Clan...*

"Flametail was playing on the lake and he fell through the ice."

Gasps spread through the group of cats, mine being quite audible. *Flametail, the ShadowClan medicine cat?* I thought with dismay. *That's terrible!*

"Is he dead?" I heard Poppyfrost ask, her voice shaking.

I then watched as Firestar glanced toward the medicine den. "His body has not been found," he explained. "Jayfeather tried to save him, but Flametail was too heavy."

I couldn't suppress yet another gasp. I whipped my head around to follow Firestar's gaze to the medicine den, my eyes narrowing.

That mouse-brain! I thought, filled with a mix of worry and anger as I pictured Jayfeather, a blind cat, trying to save another cat who was drowning. *He could have gone down with Flametail!*

But my heart began to beat faster as I thought about one of my closest friends. *Great Starclan, I hope he's okay...*

Squirrelflight, who was practically Jayfeather's mother, clearly reflected my worries. "Is Jayfeather all right?"

I felt a wave of ease as Firestar instantly nodded. "He's cold but Leafpool is with him. She'll know what to do."

She'd better.

"In the future," Firestar continued, his voice sharp, "any cat caught on the ice will be severely punished."

"Yeah," I heard Foxleap whisper behind me as Firestar leaped down from the Highledge. "By *death*."

I tried to suppress a purr of amusement as I turned back to look at the red tabby tom, flashing him a warning look.

As cats began to disperse, I then watched as Foxleap beckoned his tail towards someone, and as he began to pad towards the camp entrance, my son, Swiftpaw, and Snowpaw, who had now been

established as my sister's reincarnation, came into sight out of the crowd.

The two apprentices were talking happily to each other, as the two best friends usually would. I felt my heart warming as I watched the two of them talk and laugh, their eyes bright.

Then, whatever they were talking about was interrupted as Foxleap called to Swiftpaw from where he was standing next to the gorse tunnel. I turned my head back to see Swiftpaw nodding to Snowpaw in farewell, then running ahead of her.

For just a moment, my son's gaze met mine as he traveled. I almost padded up to meet him, but immediately held myself back as I saw that Swiftpaw's gray-blue eyes were cold and solemn, staring back at me.

I narrowed my eyes back at my son, at this point, not being shocked or even that hurt at all by the hard gaze being delivered to me.

Before I could push myself once again to join him and ask what was wrong, Swiftpaw whipped his head away from me and ran up to join Foxleap.

I watched them go before deciding that I was going to go to the medicine den with Firestar to see how Jayfeather was. I was giving StarClan thanks that the gray tabby medicine cat was okay as my eyes then fell on Snowpaw, who was just a little ways away from me.

My heart felt as if it had skipped a beat as I noticed that the young white she-cat was staring back at the camp entrance, her eyes narrowed and dark.

I simply observed as she stood where she was for a few heartbeats, not averting her gaze, before she let out a huff and turned around to walk over to Icecloud, her mentor.

I was bewildered. *Why did Snowpaw stare off at Swiftpaw like that?* I wondered fearfully, the image of her narrowed blue gaze engrained in my mind. *Has he been cold towards her as well? If so... why are they*

both being so two-faced about it?

Like I had said, Swiftpaw's coldness and separation towards me alone wasn't new. That didn't mean that I was fine with it, StarClan, no! In fact, I absolutely hated it. First, because any cat would hate for their kit to be so closed-off, and second, because I had no idea why Swiftpaw was doing this.

Swiftpaw had always been short-tempered, but it was just a couple of moons before his apprenticeship that he had become even more snappy and rude than I could have ever imagined, along with becoming so separated from the cats around him. There had been many times up until now that my son had seemed to rise above whatever was getting to him, one of those times being after the ShadowClan battle.

But, after I had questioned as to why he had fought so well, despite being an apprentice for only a quarter moon, he had grown incredibly angry and verbally pushed me away.

After we had gotten back to camp, Swiftpaw had already seemed lighter and happier, but it was just a couple of days later that he suddenly separated himself from me completely.

And so since then, we had barely spoken a word to each other.

Don't get me wrong, I had tried *many* times to speak with my son, who wouldn't? But he was always short, and never met my gaze. That being said, I could never tell what he was thinking, and I could never guess as to why he had begun to act like this all over again.

The only signs that I had that said anything was *wrong* with Swiftpaw was the creepy, horrifying voice that had found its way into my head, speaking of *Swiftpaw* and *revenge*.

Swiftpaw... revenge... Swiftpaw... revenge... Those two words had been haunting me since I had first heard them. I still had no idea what that could possibly mean - did Swiftpaw want revenge, or did some weird spirit cat want revenge on him... and why? Why *any* of it?

I couldn't help but let out a huff of frustration as I continued to

stare at the place where Swiftpaw's dark-gray tail had disappeared.

Sure, I have been fairly distracted with my warriors duties, my friends, and Dustystorm... I thought as I began to travel towards the medicine den once again. *But, when I'm alone, all I can wonder is, what is going on with my son... and why can't I fix it?*

Chapter 4

[image]

Swiftpaw's POV

Despite the snow beneath my paws, the sun was blazing in the center of the sky like never before as I crawled through the camp entrance just behind Foxleap, returning from one of our training sessions.

"Great job today, Swiftpaw, as usual!" Foxleap praised to me once we had arrived in the camp clearing. I narrowed my eyes as my mentor then looked at me up and down. "You should definitely loosen up a little, though. You're so tense sometimes!"

Gee, I wonder why? I thought sarcastically, even though Foxleap wouldn't have any idea as to why I was indeed so stiff. *Not only am I sore from the recent ShadowClan battle, but all of the training I am doing - in ThunderClan and in the Dark Forest - only adds to that!*

Luckily, Foxleap didn't probe me about that anymore. He began to pad over to the fresh-kill pile, calling back, "Take a break for now, but you and I are joining the hunting patrol later!"

I nodded and lashed my tail in farewell to the dark ginger warrior before beginning to pad over to the apprentices den. I was exhausted, having been training since dawn, so I decided that I would try and take a nap.

But, it was only heartbeats later that I paused, realizing that a nap was something that I definitely didn't want to do. Not now. *I only should sleep when I have to,* I told myself as I turned away from my den. *If I sleep, I may be dragged back to the Dark Forest...*

I had been training in the Dark Forest for moons now - since I was about a two-moon old kit, and Ashfur, a member of the Dark Forest, had managed to give me some excellent tips and skills to get me ahead.

But just a couple of days ago, I had discovered Ashfur's true motive, just by eavesdropping from some bushes a few tail-lengths away. Well, at least that he had a motive that was different from what I thought - but I didn't know what it was. The speckled-gray tom had had no idea that I was listening, and as far as I knew, he still didn't.

Since then, I had felt more trapped than I ever had in my entire life, and I had no idea what to do with this information that I had overheard. I had been trying to think about what I wanted to do... how to *handle* it.

And unfortunately, all I had managed to come up with was to continue exactly what I was doing. *Me defying against Ashfur's plan may put me in even more danger than if I were to comply with them,* I had told myself. *Until I figure something else out, I feel like this is my only option. I am probably going to continue to receive some helpful training along the way, anyway.*

Up until this moment, I had been trying to convince myself that everything would be fine... maybe. After all, I'd only be treading on sharp stones while I was asleep. During the day, I knew that I could just train as a normal ThunderClan apprentice.

Well, the only lack of normalcy being that I probably shouldn't take naps.

I didn't know if this whole decision came out of fear, or actual certainty, but I knew that I was committing to it, either way. *Ashfur may be able to manipulate me while I'm in the Dark Forest, but when I'm awake, I can proceed on as normal,* I told myself as I flitted my gaze around the ThunderClan camp. *Everything will be fine.*

I wondered how I could pass the time before going on the hunting patrol with Foxleap, and eventually decided that I would get some mouse-bile and help to get the ticks off of the elders. *Might as well get that disgusting job over with so that I'm not asked to do it later.*

I turned and quickly trotted over to the medicine den, my nose already wrinkling at the thought of carrying the repulsive heap of mouse-bile moss in my jaws as I took it to the elders.

Once I arrived at the medicine den, I simply peered inside instead of going all the way in. I could just barely see Jayfeather sitting near the back, already looking fairly dry after his fall into the icy lake as he groomed himself, and Leafpool was just beside him, sorting through the herb stocks.

Hoping that I wasn't disturbing the two - Jayfeather, especially - I took a deep breath and crawled through the bramble screen. "Hey, Leafpool," I meowed as I paused just outside of the den entrance. "Could I have some-"

I then paused, trying to suppress a hiss as a burning sensation struck one of my ears.

At first, I didn't think anything of it, but I then felt a shiver run down my spine as a very familiar voice almost seemed to be whispering to me. *Are you kidding me? What are you doing?*

I stood where I was, wide-eyed and speechless. *Can... can he hear my thoughts?* I asked myself as Ashfur's words echoed inside of my head.

Yes, I can hear you, you mouse-brain! Ashfur hissed. *Getting ticks off of the elders would be a complete waste of time. Get out of there and do something useful!*

You're kind of putting me in an uncomfortable situation by telling me that right now! I responded back. When Ashfur didn't respond anymore, I took a deep breath and reluctantly looked back up at Jayfeather and Leafpool to meet their confused gazes.

As much as I wanted to finish what I had been about to say, and continue to ask Leafpool for the mouse bile, I knew that I couldn't. Not now, at least. *I must listen to Ashfur if I want to stay out of danger.*

Well, at least *legitimate* danger. Right now, the look that Jayfeather was giving me made me feel like I was in danger just as much as Ashfur himself ever could. *Nothing like the wrath of Jayfeather to intimidate you...*

"You were saying, Swiftpaw?" Jayfeather muttered, his blind blue eyes narrowed.

Foxdung, foxdung, foxdung.

I simply stood staring back at the medicine cat for a few heartbeats, having no idea what to say, and not being able to say what I had been saying.

And my excuses were limited, because I had known for moons now that Jayfeather was aware that I was training in the Dark Forest. I had no idea as to how he was, but all I knew was that it was giving me a heck of a lot of trouble at the moment.

"Um..." I began, still not knowing what I was going to say to explain myself. Without thinking, I gestured to the ear that Ashfur had nicked with my tail. "Well... I was about to ask for some sort of herb to help with my ear."

"Your ear," Jayfeather repeated, his gaze so intense that I wondered if he wasn't blind for just a moment.

I nodded slowly, trying to simultaneously hide how intimidated I was. "Yeah, just a bit of pain," I explained before muttering a little more quietly, "It's been giving me a hard time recently." *I suppose it's not exactly a lie.*

I then shook my head quickly, realizing that I needed to get out of this den as soon as possible, not wanting to prolong this torturous encounter any more. "But I think it's alright now," I tried to meow cheerfully as I turned away from the two medicine cats. "I'll come back if it's ever giving me more trouble."

"I know something that's certainly giving me more trouble," I heard Jayfeather mutter as I crawled back out of the medicine den.

I rolled my eyes, ignoring the tom's remark, but suddenly gasping as I ran straight into the body and fur of another cat. I tried to catch myself, but that only made things worse, resulting in me slipping on the snow beneath my paws and falling onto my side.

"Mouse droppings!" I cursed to myself, shaking my head to get the

snow off of my eyes and face.

My ears then pricked in surprise as I heard a purr of amusement come from behind me. "Nice fall."

I then felt teeth slowly grab my scruff before I was hauled from the ground.

I let out a huff as I shook out my fur. "I can get up myself, you know," I murmured as I turned around to face the cat I had bumped into. "I know how to stand."

I then felt my fur begin to bristle slightly as my gaze fell on Ivypaw, who had been standing behind me, her dark blue eyes glittering with humor.

"Well, in that moment you sure didn't," she teased before nudging me with her shoulder. "Sorry, Swiftpaw. I didn't see you there!"

"I-I... I-" I stammered as I looked back at the silver and white she-cat. I then shook my head quickly before giving Ivypaw a curt nod. "Yeah... sorry." *What's wrong with me?* I asked myself, realizing how stupid I was acting, and confused as to why my heart was suddenly beating faster.

Ivypaw then gave me one last amused, skeptical look before nodding to me and padding into the medicine den. I found that I was watching her go, not turning away until the last of her tail had disappeared into the den.

I was wondering why I had suddenly gone full-on idiot mode during that whole conversation with Ivypaw. I mean... she wasn't scary or malicious, why would I be nervous? We both trained in the Dark Forest together. *Hopefully even once she's a warrior and I'm still an apprentice, we can still train together there...*

In fact, getting to be an apprentice alongside Ivypaw even in just ThunderClan had been a lot of fun. She was always so dedicated to her training, so agile in her movements, so brave... so-

"Ow!" I exclaimed, batting at my own ear with one of my paws as it suddenly felt like some cat had scratched it. It was the same pain I

had felt when I had walked into the medicine den. *Is Ashfur messing with me again?*

I didn't hear anything from the Dark Forest warrior after waiting for a few heartbeats, so I simply let out a frustrated growl and began to pad away from the medicine den. *So, is Ashfur able to manipulate me outside of my dreams too?* I thought irritably. *I guess I'm not free to fully be an apprentice when I'm awake after all... Now that I think about it, it's been this way for about a quarter moon now.*

I hadn't given it much thought until now, but I was now realizing that I had been feeling these strange pains in my ear for about a quarter moon - since the ShadowClan battle... since I had become an apprentice, in fact. Every time I did something that wasn't hunting or training, I would feel a slight twinge in my right ear.

Even when I tried to talk to my mother, Goldenshine, it was as painful as ever. *Luckily I'm not talking to her much, anyway...* I thought, not being able to suppress a bit of sadness as I reflected on how I had been avoiding the she-cat that I had once been closer to than anyone, even Snowpaw. *She's become suspicious of me getting extra training, and I'm going to make it a guarantee that she doesn't know more than she has to. But does Ashfur need to remind me of that?*

I found myself bubbling up with frustration as I saw a familiar ginger pelt approach me out of the corner of my eye. "Hey, Swiftpaw. I-"

"What?" I barked back at Foxleap, not being able to calm down yet from my feelings earlier. "Are we going on that hunting patrol *already?*"

Foxleap's eyes flashed with alarm for just a moment before he shook his head quickly. "No, Swiftpaw!" he insisted before sitting down and wrapping his tail around his paws, clearly trying to forget that his apprentice had just growled at him. "I just was going to ask if you wanted to go to your first Gathering tonight?"

Suddenly, all of my frustration flew away as quickly as a hummingbird. *My first Gathering ever!* I thought excitedly. "Of course I want to! Are you kidding?"

Foxleap let out a snort before turning around to join his sister, Icecloud by the fresh-kill pile. "I think if I had been kidding, you'd claw my ears off!"

I let out a hiss at my mentor's words. As much as I truly always enjoyed Foxleap's company and getting to learn with him, sometimes he touched at a nerve without realizing it. I bit back an insult before taking a deep breath and beginning to pad around the camp clearing. *Until our hunting patrol goes out, I may as well see what I can do that doesn't cause a spirit cat to shred my fur,* I thought bitterly. *At least I have the Gathering to look forward to tonight!*

I had only been wandering for a few moments before I stopped in my tracks, my ears pricking as I heard coughing come from the nursery - high pitched, very hoarse coughing. *That's not the sort of cough you get when you just have something caught in your throat.*

I backed up a few steps and then peered into the nursery, surprised to see that Cherrykit was lying down in her nest. She was on her side as she continued to cough. Poppyfrost was standing over her daughter, her eyes filled with anxiety while Molekit stood a couple of tail-lengths away, his eyes wide.

I found myself welling up with worry as I watched the small she-cat wriggling around in the nest, continuing to cough uncontrollably. *Is Cherrykit sick?* I thought fearfully.

I decided to ask if everything was okay, but just as I was about to open my mouth, it felt as if physical claws were digging into my ear.

I let out an infuriated hiss. "Great StarClan, will you knock it off?" I growled out loud, batting at my ear once again with one of my paws.

"*What?!*"

My eyes then turned into wide gray-blue moons as I realized that I had scolded Ashfur out loud right in front of Poppyfrost. *She wouldn't know that a Dark Forest cat is scratching at my ear. All she can assume is that I was talking to Cherrykit!*

I began to stammer, knowing that upsetting a queen wasn't good news at all. "I-I-"

"How could you be so fox-hearted?" Poppyfrost roared at me before picking up Cherrykit by the scruff. "My kit is lying here fighting for breath, and you tell her to *knock it off?*"

I stood where I was, speechless as Poppyfrost stomped past me and out of the nursery, Molekit following behind her. "If anything should knock it off, it should be that horrible temper of yours!"

Not even taking the time to apologize to Poppyfrost or attempting to explain, I let out a frustrated hiss and stormed out of the camp through the dirtplace passage, my fur bristling.

As soon as I was sure that I was out of sight and earshot of any other cat, I slashed and some grass and growled, "You know someone who should knock it off?!"

I then froze, clamping my mouth shut as I suddenly felt as if a cat was standing beside me, and I could swear that a cat's heavy and...stinky breath was blowing against my ear.

I'd watch it, Swiftpaw... Ashfur hissed inside of my head in an absolutely bone-chilling voice. I then let out a sigh of relief as the breathing on my ear went away, and Ashfur spoke in his normal tone. *I'm only helping you.*

"*Helping* me?" I repeated out loud, outraged, before shaking my head quickly and telling myself that yelling at Ashfur wouldn't bring anything good. "Last time I checked, helping cats didn't involve pain," I muttered calmly.

Now that you're an apprentice, and as long as you're under my training, Ashfur continued, *I'm going to make sure that you focus on what's really important - being the best warrior that you be. That doesn't involve showing so much vulnerability towards cats that are only veering you off course.*

"*What?!* I-" I then cut myself off as I was about to protest. I closed my eyes and let out a sigh. *You can't disagree with him. Bad idea.*

"You're right," I then whispered before slowly leaving the dirtplace clearing and returning to camp. "You're right."

Chapter 5

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

Goodness gracious... I thought irritably as I adjusted myself in my nest once again. *I truly don't think sleeping has ever felt this impossible.*

I had only just gone into the warriors den to try and take a nap, but it felt as if I had been lying in my nest trying to sleep for days and days already. I'd been feeling quite achy and stiff since I had woken up just after dawn, so I had thought that I would try and rest up before I went on patrol.

But what was unfortunate was that fact that my brain was as wide awake as it could be - ready to take on the day, swim in the lake, pelt across the forest, whatever, but my physical condition was not matching up. *I want action, but my body doesn't. Ugh, that's frustrating,* I thought as stretched out.

I then let out a huff as I decided to stand up. I hated how pessimistic I was being. *Maybe you just need to loosen up a little bit!* I told myself, padding out of the den with a bit of pep in my step.

I then sighed as I looked down at my belly, my heart practically growing with love. *Soon, you will really have to rest up for these precious little ones, so take advantage of your time! Anyways, you're going to the Gathering tonight too. You might as well start warming up for that!*

My optimistic self-encouragement actually working, I let out a satisfied sigh and began to pad through the camp, ready to fulfill any duties that I was needed for.

The first thing that caught my eye was actually Mistpelt who had just nodded a greeting to Firestar as she traveled across the camp. She had a huge clump of moss in her mouth.

I tilted my head and flicked my ears, wondering what my mother was doing. But, as she lashed her tail and approached what I knew to be the elders den, it all became clear. *She's finally making her nest in the elders den...* I thought sadly. *Wow, that's so weird.*

The fact that my mother was retiring felt almost as if a piece of my heart had disappeared. Yes, Mistpelt was still alive and well, but things wouldn't be the same. It was likely that we'd never patrol together again, or get to go on our mother-daughter hunting trips. *But it will be alright!* I tried to tell myself. *If anything, Mistpelt being confined to the camp is better, especially since I'll also be in camp more often with kits soon!*

I was about to follow the fluffy gray and white she-cat when my attention was suddenly brought to the Highledge. Sandstorm and Foxleap were standing near the fresh-kill pile, scanning their heads around camp as if they were looking for someone.

Foxleap's gaze actually stopped when it fell on me, his ears flicking simultaneously. "Hey, Lilypetal!" he called out to me. "We're going on a hunting patrol. Want to join us?"

Just as I was about to give the dark ginger warrior an eager nod, I watched as Sandstorm shot him an angry look. "Are you mouse-brained?" the pale ginger she-cat hissed. "She's expecting kits, and you invite her on patrol?"

Foxleap's eyes widened as he backed up just a pawstep. "I was only asking!" the young warrior insisted. "What did you want me to do? Yell at her that she can't-"

"Hey, it's alright!" I insisted, padding up closer to the two bickering cats as I purred with amusement. I touched my tail tip to Sandstorm's shoulder as I meowed. "I appreciate the concern, but honestly, I would *love* to come."

I then continued to purr as I flicked Foxleap's ear with my tail. "I also appreciate you asking," I reassured him. "Just don't do it while I'm... you know, *giving birth.*"

"Will do," Foxleap purred back before peering past me, letting out a

sigh of relief. "There's Swiftpaw. Finally!"

I followed Foxleap's gaze to see that the gray-black apprentice was emerging from the dirtplace tunnel. I was suddenly curious as I noticed the irritated gleam in his eye, and his fur was bristling slightly.

I narrowed my eyes as Foxleap called him over. *I mean... I guess the dirtplace isn't a fun experience sometimes...*

"Hm... I'd definitely say we should find one more cat to join us. With leaf-bare coming so early, our hunting patrols are going to have to be fairly big," Sandstorm observed, interrupting my thoughts. I then watched as she gave Foxleap another look full of challenge. "Want me to go to the nursery and see if any other queens want to join us?"

I tried to suppress another purr of amusement as Foxleap rolled his eyes and snorted. "Great StarClan, I-"

"I'll find someone!" I cut Foxleap off, not wanting another bicker to arise. Without waiting for a response, I turned around and began to trot around the camp. "I'll be right back!"

I paused almost immediately when I actually saw Leafpool crawl out of the medicine den. Her eyes looked tired, and her tail was drooped to the ground.

She's probably exhausted after caring for Jayfeather, I realized. *Not just because he fell through the ice... just the fact that it's Jayfeather she's caring for.*

Feeling a pang of sympathy for the former medicine cat, I decided to approach her. "Hi, Leafpool!" I meowed kindly once I was a tail-length in front of her. "Do you want to join our hunting patrol?" I then nodded to where the other three cats were waiting.

As I expected, Leafpool was hesitant at first. She looked back at the medicine den as she meowed, "Well, maybe. But..."

"You certainly don't have to," I insisted, keeping my gaze on the tabby and white she-cat. "I just thought you might like to go out

and clear your head a bit."

I then watched as Leafpool nodded slowly, turning her head back to me. "You know what? You're right," she purred, beginning to pad over to where our patrol had gathered. Once I had caught up to her, she dipped her head to me. "Thank you for thinking of me."

"Sure," I meowed back as we arrived to the three waiting cats. I stopped, flicking my tail to the cat beside me. "I've got Leafpool!"

Sandstorm gave a single nod before beginning to lead us out of camp. Foxleap, who I had fallen into step with, stopped almost immediately. I watched as he let out a confused grunt and turned his head back towards where we had started.

"You coming, Swiftpaw?" Foxleap called back.

I myself turned around to see that my daughter's son hadn't even taken one step. I sniffed as I realized that his head was tilted to the side, scratching at his ear with one of his hind paws and muttering under his breath. Once he heard his mentor's call, he rolled his eyes and let out a hiss as he slowly walked up to join us.

I exchanged a concerned look with Foxleap before continuing to follow Sandstorm out of camp. *I wonder what the deal is with Swiftpaw?* I asked myself as I crawled through the gorse tunnel and out into the forest. *He's seemed more irritable than usual lately.*

I then felt a pang of fear as I tried to multitask - looking for prey amidst the snow, and trying not to panic. *Great StarClan, I hope that nothing dire is going on in the Dark Forest...* I thought nervously before shaking my head quickly. *Well, he's training with Ashfur, so of course!*

Fortunately and unfortunately, Sandstorm's voice from the head of the group interrupted my thoughts. "I suggest that we all split up," Sandstorm meowed as her gaze flitted all around the snowed-over forest. "Especially now, it might be better if we're looking in many places at the same time - we're more likely to find *something*."

"Sounds good to me!" Foxleap exclaimed, giving a definitive nod in

agreement.

"I would hope so," Sandstorm murmured before completely turning around to face our patrol. "I can go alone... Foxleap can take Swiftpaw... and then Lilypetal and Leafpool can go together."

Every cat nodded to the patrol leader to indicate that her words were heard before dispersing into their assigned pairs.

"And remember, stay away from the ice!" Sandstorm called back as she disappeared through some brambles, some snow falling to the ground as she shook them.

"Okay," I breathed, beginning to wander around the general area as I tried to catch any signs of prey nearby. "Where do you suggest we go, Leafpool?"

When my hunting partner didn't say a word, I stopped in my tracks and turned to see that Leafpool was still standing in the same place, staring ahead.

"Leafpool?" I repeated, padding back up to join her, my own intrigue beginning to rise.

I then narrowed my eyes as I realized what she was doing. *She's looking off in the direction that Foxleap and Swiftpaw went.*

"What?" Leafpool finally meowed, shaking her head quickly as if to bring herself back into focus. "Great StarClan, Lilypetal. I'm sorry. Let's go!"

"Let's do that," I murmured, staring back at Leafpool with narrowed eyes as we padded side by side deeper into the forest.

Once we came to another small clearing, I gaped my mouth open in an attempt to catch any prey scent. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see that Leafpool was doing the same, but her gaze still looked as if she were somewhere else.

And sure enough, she definitely was. "Lilypetal, can I ask you something?" she meowed softly, turning so that she could meet my gaze.

Uh, oh. "Sure!" I meowed kindly, trying to hide my immense curiosity as I padded up to meet Leafpool. "Is something wrong?"

"No! It's just..." Leafpool began, clearly reluctant to say what she was thinking. "Do you... do you ever think that Swiftpaw looks just like Crowfeather?"

My eyes widened, and I tried to keep my mouth from dropping. *Wow, that's definitely is not the first thing that I would guess that she was going to ask,* I thought. *Or the second... or third.*

Despite my shock, I tried to legitimately answer Leafpool's question. "Well... I guess I've never thought about it before," I replied shrugging. "But..."

But it was true, so much so that I was shocked that cats hadn't shown suspicion earlier. Swiftpaw did carry many of Crowfeather's traits - his gray-black fur, his blue eyes (though Swiftpaw's were darker), his long legs but muscular build. *He even acts like him sometimes...*

None of this was new information to me, though. It made complete sense. I was one of the only cats in all four of the Clans that knew... but Breezepelt, Crowfeather's son, was Swiftpaw's father.

It had been some time ago, but Goldenshine had fallen in love with Breezepelt of WindClan, unfortunately resulting in my daughter expecting his kits and having to hide the kits' father from ThunderClan. Thus, Swiftpaw was here, and I suppose had taken on many of his kin's traits.

Being the one of the only cats that knew all of this, I had no idea how to answer to Leafpool. "B-but it would have to be a coincidence, right?" I stammered, already feeling guilty for lying to the former medicine cat.

"...Coincidence... sure," Leafpool murmured, her gaze turning back towards where the apprentice had disappeared. "I just can't help but wonder..." I simply listened as she went on. "He may be smaller now, but I'm sure I'll mistake him for Crowfeather once he's grown more."

I continued to hesitate as Leafpool then sat down, her eyes looking thoughtful. "You know..." she then murmured. "I still remember the night that Swiftpaw was born."

"Oh yeah?" I meowed, sitting down next to her as I braced myself for what I was maybe going to hear next. "What a night that was."

"Definitely," Leafpool responded. "I remember that ThunderClan was traveling back home from the Gathering, and we found the little scrap dangling from Goldenshine's jaws. You and Thornclaw were standing with her."

"Yes, that's right," I murmured, nodding my head in agreement. *I'm terrified to see where she is going with this. I hate to admit that I might know.*

"Mousewhisker declared to the Clan that the kit was his," Leafpool continued. I then felt my stomach twist as the tabby and white she-cat paused, her eyes going to slits. "If you ask me... Swiftpaw doesn't look like Mousewhisker at all."

Shoot, shoot, shoot, I thought, trying to control my breathing as my heart began to beat faster. "Um... well-"

"Hold on," Leafpool then muttered, her ears flicking and her tail raising in warning as her gaze fell on some bushes just a few fox-lengths away. I couldn't help but feel a wave of relief, truly feeling like I had been blessed by StarClan, when I realized that Leafpool had managed to catch sight of some prey. *Leafpool has no idea, but I'm practically in a full-on interrogation right now!*

I simply watched, trying to stay as silent as I could as Leafpool went down into a hunting crouch, slowly beginning to creep up to what she had seen.

Just heartbeats later, she leaped, and she eventually arrived back carrying an incredibly scrawny squirrel.

"Great job!" I praised, sniffing at the small creature. "It's better than nothing during this time, I suppose."

"That's for sure!" Leafpool meowed, beginning to bury her catch.

I continued to be filled with relief as I thought that maybe Leafpool had been able to forget about what we had been discussing. But to my dismay, it was clearly still fresh in the she-cat's mind as we then began to pad through the forest.

"Anyway... as much as I have no reason to question Mousewhisker's claim, I can't help but question it..." I then felt myself tense up as Leafpool turned her head to me. Her eyes then narrowed once again, and that look revealed that she was clearly able to tell that I knew something that she didn't.

"Something seems off. I would know more than any other cat about what's it's like to hide something..." she muttered. "Lilypetal?"

"Hm?" I murmured, my eyes widening.

"Who is Swiftpaw's real father?"

Foxdung.

I then let out a sigh, almost trying to release my initial panic. Leafpool had been suspicious, and she had had all the right to be suspicious. *All I can do is tell her the truth now... she's caught me.*

But I actually felt a little more relaxed now, knowing that I wasn't having to dodge the former medicine cat's questions anymore. "Well, Leafpool, I'll say that it's completely understandable to think that Swiftpaw looks like Crowfeather," I began. "They are kin."

I then watched as Leafpool's amber eyes widened. "Wait..." she breathed. "Are you saying...?"

"Breezepelt is Swiftpaw's father," I answered for her, lowering my head. "Mousewhisker was helping Goldenshine keep her place in ThunderClan by claiming that he was the father."

Leafpool looked as if she was in complete bewilderment. "Oh my StarClan..." she whispered. "Wow..."

"I know," I meowed back, nodding my head slowly.

"I'm shocked that Breezepelt would even consider following that

same path that his... his father did," Leafpool meowed, a shiver running down her spine as she sat down.

I almost felt Leafpool's regret as I put the tip of my tail on her shoulder. *Just the fact that she's not a medicine cat anymore probably reminds her every day of the choices she made...* I thought sadly, recalling what I had been told about Leafpool and Crowfeather - how they had met in secret for moons, and had even attempted to run away together.

I then nodded, agreeing with Leafpool's words. "I do too. I really do," I murmured back. *Goldenshine, which she is, must have been quite the catch for him...*

"Goldenshine must have been a distraction of some sort," Leafpool realized out loud, repeating my thoughts. "Because, Great StarClan, has Breezepelt become quite the angry.... *malicious* cat. I've noticed it many times."

"Really?" I questioned, my head tilting to the side. "How so?"

"As I would expect, him finding out that his father shared kits with another mate probably sparked something inside of him. He was very upset," Leafpool explained, her amber gaze now dark. "I know he's not even my own son... but I worry about him sometimes."

Before I could even reply to the she-cat's grim words, she lifted up her head to meet my gaze, her eyes suddenly urgent. "Does Swiftpaw know that Breezepelt is his father?" she asked, her voice slightly shaking with what sounded like worry.

Understanding all of the reasons that Leafpool would worry about that, I quickly nodded to her and wrapped my tail around her shoulders. "Yes, as far as I know," I answered calmly. "Goldenshine was going to make sure that he knew because-"

"Because of what she had seen from other cats?" Leafpool murmured, one of her eyebrows raised.

"... Yes," I answered hesitantly, suddenly worried if this whole conversation was touching a nerve with the former medicine cat.

"Well, good," Leafpool meowed, speaking evenly as she then led the way through the forest. "I'm glad that she could learn from others' mistakes."

I then sighed as I followed behind the tabby she-cat. *Well, at least that it's Leafpool of all cats that has found out Goldenshine's secret...* I realized, knowing very well that I could trust her with this information. *It was actually quite nice to speak of out loud, when I've been helping Goldenshine hide it for so long by not telling anyone.*

For a while, the two of us trailed through the leaf-bare covered trees in silence, non-verbally sharing our own distress as we couldn't catch any signs of prey anywhere.

We actually went so deep into the forest that the trail that led to my old Twoleg nest came into sight. I simply let out a snort as my eyes fell on it.

Leafpool seemed to hear my scoff, pausing briefly as she followed my gaze to look at the trail. "Do you ever miss your kittypet life even a little bit?" she suddenly asked.

Well, there's no doubt about that answer. "Heck, no!" I exclaimed, turning away from all of those distant memories, mentally and physically. "Sure, I can't help but envy kittypets during times like these, though."

"How so?" Leafpool asked, her head tilting as she began to walk again.

"While we're out here searching for food and finding any means of not freezing to death that we can, they're in there getting all of the food that they want," I explained before shaking my head quickly. "But I wouldn't trade what I've got for the world. I love that we all stick together through the rough times, and that we can always depend on each other." *You never get that sense of community living in a Twoleg nest.*

Unfortunately after passing through that area, and up until finally reconvening with the patrol, Leafpool and I hadn't managed to find anything else besides the scrawny squirrel that Leafpool had caught.

But luckily Swiftpaw had a small mouse in his jaws, and Sandstorm was carrying a shrew and another mouse.

It certainly was enough for ThunderClan, for when we arrived back into camp with our catches, many cats' eyes lit up with a mix of hunger and excitement.

Just as I was dropping one of Sandstorm's catches onto the pile, I let out a hiss, trying not to fall over as a large bout of pain shot through my side. "Holy beetles on a stick, that hurt!"

Leafpool, who was right next to me, carried my weight as I fell to the side. I looked up at her to see her eyes glowing with humor and sympathy. "Those kits of yours giving you trouble?" she asked kindly, helping me to fully stand back up.

"More trouble than they're going to give me once they come out, you mean?" I joked.

Leafpool let out a purr of amusement before beginning to pad over to the direction of the medicine den. "Here, come with me," the former medicine cat meowed. "Hopefully Jayfeather won't mind me giving you a poppy seed to help with that pain."

"Oh, thank you, Leafpool!" I purred as I followed her, then crawling inside of the den, where Leafpool was already sniffing through all of the stacks.

"Great StarClan, does Jayfeather organize these differently than I do!" I heard Leafpool murmur as I watched her grab something with one of her paws. Luckily, Jayfeather couldn't hear his former mentor's critques, for he had probably gone out to collect herbs, and wasn't in the den.

Leafpool placed the poppy seed at my paws, and I immediately licked it up and swallowed. Already feeling a bit better knowing that this herb would take action soon, I let out a sigh of relief. "Thanks again," I breathed before shaking out my fur. "I can already tell that this process is going to be much more difficult than the first time." *This Gathering tonight, unfortunately, will probably be the last one that I go to before the kits are born.*

"I have to say that I agree," Leafpool replied, padding up to sit next to me and observing my belly. "As much as you probably don't want to hear this... I think you should go to the nursery a little earlier than you had originally planned."

Thornclaw will be happy to hear that, I joked to myself before reluctantly nodding back to Leafpool, having to admit that she was probably right. As much as I wanted to serve the Clan as a warrior for as long as possible, I wanted my kits to be healthy and safe, which meant that I would have to sacrifice some things. *I'd do anything for them. Absolutely anything,* I thought lovingly. *This is nothing!*

"I definitely will, as hard as it will be," I responded to Leafpool as I ran my own tail over my belly, feeling the slight bulge. "But it will all be worth it soon."

Chapter 6

[image]

Goldenshine's POV

It was the sight of many ThunderClan cats beginning to gather near the camp entrance that caused me to practically inhale the vole that I was working on. *My first Gathering back as a warrior!* I realized as I swallowed the last bite. *No way am I going to let myself fall behind!*

I quickly stood up and padded up to join the assembling cats. The first cat that caught my eye was the gray tabby pelt of Jayfeather, who was traveling over from his den. Luckily now he looked completely dry, and the water bath certainly had gone in his favor - his fur looking shiny and sleek.

Once the medicine cat had settled down with the other cats waiting to leave, I trotted over to him. "Hey, Jayfeather!" I purred, sitting down in front of him. "How are-" My meow was then interrupted by a small spasm in my throat, and I felt my diaphragm tense as it was released.

I rolled my eyes, letting out a groan. *Dark Forest-cursed hiccups!*

Jayfeather snorted as he licked a paw, running it over one of his ears. "Eat some prey a little too quickly?" he meowed, lashing his tail. "Great StarClan, are you a kit? You should know better than that."

"Shut up!" I purred after another hiccup. "Would a-" Another hiccup. "Would a kit make the effort to ask how you are doing?"

Jayfeather let out a huff. "I'm sure some do, but they wouldn't dare." After I let out yet another hiccup, he then answered, "I'm fine. Why would I not be?"

My eyes widened as another hiccup came out. "You jumped into the ice-cold lake! Are you crazy?" I exclaimed before twitching my tail,

simultaneously hiccuping. "Actually, I can answer that already."

"Whatever," Jayfeather muttered, rolling his eyes. "But I really am fine. Leafpool helped me to warm up, and she gave me some thyme for the shock."

"She did?" I breathed, my heart warming at the prospect of Jayfeather letting Leafpool take care of him after all they had been through. "I mean... Leafpool really did?" *For a while, it seemed like Jayfeather, Lionblaze and Hollyleaf too, wouldn't dare even get near Leafpool!* I realized to myself as I tried to search Jayfeather's gaze. *This is a lot of progress.*

Jayfeather simply shrugged, letting his blind gaze go to the ground. "Yeah..." he nearly whispered. "But-"

Jayfeather's meow was then interrupted by a gasp, and both Jayfeather and I turned our heads to see Snowpaw standing in front of us, her eyes wide.

"Great StarClan, I'm sorry!" the white apprentice exclaimed, dipping her head. "I nearly ran straight into the both of you and didn't even realize it!"

I let out a faint purr of amusement before taking a step back. "That's-" Another hiccup interrupted my sentence. "That's alright, Snowpaw. Go on ahead."

Snowpaw flashed me a quick glance full of humor before sliding her way between Jayfeather and I. "Goodness, Snowpaw, you have got to get out of your own head!" I heard her mutter to herself as she trotted up to join her mentor, Icecloud.

I simply looked back at her for a few heartbeats, my eyes narrowed. *Snowflight was always in her head...* I thought longingly. I wondered what the young she-cat was thinking about. *The fact that it's her first Gathering, sort of? A dream she had last night? Or... maybe about the reason that she was looking so weirdly at Swiftpaw earlier today...?*

That latest possibility had been jabbing at me all day. If it were any other cat, I wouldn't have overanalyzed it as much as I was. But

Snowpaw being the reincarnation of my sister, Snowflight, indicated that she certainly knew more than the average apprentice.

For many moons now, my sister's soul was becoming more and more apparent through Snowpaw - showing skills only a medicine cat could possess, carrying Snowflight's personality traits, and she even seemed to be recognizing parts of camp that she had never seen before. *I wonder what this first Gathering will be like for her?* I wondered as I turned back to face Jayfeather. *Will she remember the island at all? Or any of the cats? Great StarClan, there's still so much for her to re-discover!*

I then took a deep breath. *But it will help us to figure out why Snowflight has been brought back... because Jayfeather and I still don't have the darnedest idea.*

I then decided that I needed some updates, so I lightly touched Jayfeather's shoulder with the tip of my tail. "I'm curious..." I murmured very quietly, taking one step closer to the medicine cat. "Have you had any dreams about her lately?"

I then watched as Jayfeather shook his head quickly, as if he had also been deep in thought. "Who?" he asked, shaking out his fur.

I let out a huff as I rolled my eyes. "Mousefur!" I exclaimed sarcastically before flicking Jayfeather's ear with my tail. "Snowpaw, you mouse-brain!"

Jayfeather lightly pawed my tail away as I purred with amusement. He then sighed, his blue eyes growing thoughtful as he seemed to be genuinely thinking about my question. My ears were prickling with anticipation.

"Well... it's hard to say," Jayfeather whispered, his tail swishing back and forth. "I do think I have some dreams about her." I then tilted my head as Jayfeather snorted. "Among all of the others..."

I found my heart beating faster as I wondered if any of Jayfeather's dreams about Snowpaw had managed to give away anything. "You think? What do you mean?" I pressed, my fur rising slightly as I grew intrigued. "What do you see?"

"Keep your fur on!"Jayfeather hissed, truly seeming to be try to grasp at his thoughts. "To sum it up-"

Jayfeather was then interrupted as I hiccuped.

"To sum it up," Jayfeather repeated through gritted teeth, his eyes flashing with irritation as I tried to hold back a purr of amusement. "They've been very obscure... but I have seen some clearer images of her... fighting another cat? I couldn't tell you who it was."

I found my heart sinking with disappointment. *It is something. Something scary, but...* "Well, that could mean anything, couldn't it?" I murmured sadly, shifting my paws from side to side as my head fell to the ground. "And you said that these dreams have been hazy?"

Jayfeather nodded. "Lately they have been."

"Well... then we're not much further with things, are we?" I concluded, sighing.

"I suppose not."

I shook my head slowly, trying to push down my increasing dismay. *I'm really going to have to be patient with this whole thing, aren't I?* I said to myself. *That's not exactly my strongsuit...*

Trying to move on for the moment, knowing that finding out why my sister had come back from the dead would take more time than this, I decided to change the subject slightly. After hiccuping again, that is. "So... you said that these Snowpaw dreams are among many others," I began, letting my head tilt to the side. "What else-"

"Hey, Goldenshine!"

My words were interrupted by a very enthusiastic meow, and I whipped my head around to see one of my best friends, Nightwing, standing a few fox-lengths away with Dustystorm by her side.

"Come here!" the sleek black she-cat exclaimed, her tail flicking as if to beckon me over.

"I second that!" Dustystorm purred, and my heart melted at my mate's adorable eager gaze.

I purred and gave them an enthusiastic nod, then turning back to Jayfeather. I wanted to finish what I had been about to ask the tabby tom.

But unfortunately for me, I looked back at him to see that he was already taking a few pawsteps back, nodding to me in farewell before joining Lionblaze and Dovepaw near the front. *Well... so much for that!*

I watched him for a few moments, slightly disappointed that my curiosity wasn't going to be relinquished, then turned around to run over to Dustystorm and Nightwing.

"Hey, you two!" I purred as I approached them. "What's up?"

Dustystorm pressed back as I had let my muzzle brush against his. "We wanted you to walk to the island with us!" he purred back.

Nightwing snorted. "Well, sure *we* did," she meowed, her eyes glittering with humor as she nudged her brother on the shoulder. "But of course, this one was a bit more eager about that idea."

I let out a *mrrow* of laughter as Dustystorm pulled away from me and flashed Nightwing a warning look before his eyes softened. "Wait a moment," he meowed shyly, his loving gaze meeting mine. "I don't have to be secretive about that anymore, do I?"

"Oh, my love, it was never a secret," I teased, licking Dustystorm's cheek as he rolled his eyes at my comment.

Nightwing and I then exploded with laughter as ThunderClan began to exit the ThunderClan camp and travel to the island.

Dustystorm simply shook his head slowly, his gaze warm as Nightwing and I caught our breaths again. "Are you so sure about that, Goldenshine?" Dustystorm meowed, his eyes narrowed as a purr rose in his throat. "You're the one that nearly walked away from me before I was about to tell you my feelings for you!"

"Goldenshine!" Nightwing exclaimed, her fur brushing mine on my other side. "Why would you do that?"

I let out a sigh filled with fondness as I recalled that day, then batting at Dustystorm's ear with a sheathed paw. "Because your brother was being very vague!" I joked, my voice full of laughter still. "I didn't want to jump to conclusions!"

I mean, it was true. It had seemed too good to be true, and I didn't want to assume the best so that my heart wouldn't have *shattered!*

"Hmmm... so there wouldn't have been any doubt there if my advances were so obvious!" Dustystorm exclaimed, his tail lifting up into the air and his blue eyes gleaming.

I couldn't help but roll my eyes as I dug my head into Dustystorm's neck fur. "Fiiinnnneee. You've stumped me," I conceded, still purring.

"Oh, I love this!" Nightwing purred as I pulled away from Dustystorm. "Who knew that being a third cat alongside a couple could be so entertaining?"

The three of us fell into another bout of laughter as we proceeded to travel to the island. And we continued to joke around until we actually got there.

These two are an absolute blessing from StarClan, I thought, my heart filled with gratitude as Dustystorm, Nightwing and I leaped onto the fallen tree that served as a bridge to the island. *I'm so glad to have them in my life.*

Almost immediately after the three of us were padding back onto grass again, I saw Dustystorm's ears prick as something seemed to catch his eye in the distance.

"Oh, there's Crowfrost!" my mate exclaimed, his tail flicking towards the ShadowClan warrior that he had befriended at a previous Gathering. I let out a small purr at Dustystorm's excitement, then closing my eyes as he touched his nose to mine.

"I'll see you later," he whispered to me before licking my cheek and

beginning to trot over to Crowfrost.

I then let out another purr of amusement as I heard Nightwing let out a snort beside me. "Gee, thanks!" she called out to Dustystorm, mocking anger that her brother hadn't given her a proper farewell.

I gave Nightwing a light nudge. "Mm, tough," I muttered, pawing at the she-cat's shoulder.

"Great StarClan, you're so mean!" Nightwing purred as the two of us began to pad side by side onto the island. "But Dustystorm is too, so I guess you're a perfect match!"

The two of us let out *mrrows* of laughter before beginning to scan our gazes around the gathering cats, gossiping and whispering to each other.

"Great StarClan," I heard Nightwing breath after a few heartbeats of silence. I turned my head to see that her gaze was locked on something that I couldn't see quite yet.

I narrowed my eyes, interest sparking in me as I noticed the clear gleam of awe in my friend's gaze. "What's up?" I asked, trying to look for what she was staring at so intensely.

I tried to suppress a purr, seeing that Nightwing was very intent on keeping her gaze on whatever she was looking at.

"Oh, it's just..." Nightwing breathed, finally breaking her gaze to look at me, but almost immediately returning it. "Who *is* that?"

Thanks for the thorough explanation, I thought sarcastically. "Who?" I asked, trying to follow Nightwing's gaze again.

"Her!" Nightwing answered, pointing her muzzle over a crowd of what looked like WindClan cats. "That pale tabby she-cat with the blue eyes. Who is that?"

My ears flicked as I realized who Nightwing was talking about, and almost instantly after my eyes fell on the WindClan she-cat she was referring to. "Oh, you mean Heathertail?" I questioned, nodding my head to her.

"Is that her name?" Nightwing whispered, her gaze glittering as she looked back at Heathertail. "She's so pretty, don't you think?"

I felt my eyebrows raising at my friend's question. "Oh yeah?" I murmured as I let a smile stretch across my face. "Yes, she is a very beautiful cat!"

As Nightwing and I then continued to walk together, I nearly let out a gasp as I noticed a very familiar figure standing next to the WindClan warrior that Nightwing found so attractive. *I guess Nightwing isn't the only one...*

Breezepelt was flanking Heathertail, their muzzles fairly close as they seemed to be exchanging words. My former mate's eyes were glowing as he listened to whatever the pale tabby she-cat was meowing. I mean, it looked as if she was telling him the secret to being able to obtain all of the prey in the forest.

Hm, interesting... I thought, but finding that I didn't even feel one pang of jealousy. Why would I? I had moved on long ago from what Breezepelt and I had shared, and now I had Dustystorm, who I knew could make me happier than any other cat would.

In fact, I found that I was quite pleased with what I was seeing. *Both of us have managed to move on,* I thought happily. *We've both grown apart from each other, which is what we needed to do.*

I let out a satisfied sigh as I settled down next to Nightwing near the large oak, knowing that the Gathering would begin pretty soon.

As I waited, I continued to flit my eyes around the clearing. They stopped when they fell on the gray-black pelt of my son, who was in a small huddle with Snowpaw, talking with Mossypaw and Rushpaw of RiverClan.

Good, I thought, letting out a relieved huff. *Good. I'm glad to see that he's actually interacting with others at his first Gathering.*

To my surprise though, after a few heartbeats of watching him, I began to notice that his dark blue gaze seemed to be flicking over in another direction.

And it didn't take me long to realize that his gaze was directed over at the same crowd of WindClan cats - right where Breezepelt was sitting as he continued to speak with Heathertail.

Oh my StarClan, I thought, feeling a mix of joy and nerves. *Does Swiftpaw recognize Breezepelt as his father?*

I then felt my fur rise slightly as Swiftpaw's gaze then shifted over to me, his eyes full of questioning and wariness as he nodded over to Breezepelt, confirming my suspicions.

Does he want to talk to him? I wondered as I stared back at Swiftpaw. Suddenly bubbling up with excitement, I almost found myself standing up and taking my paws over to Swiftpaw so that I could take him over and introduce him to his father.

But, I stopped myself. *How suspicious would that look, you mouse-brain?* I asked myself, wanting to bang my head against a tree. *Swiftpaw is going to have to do this by himself if he wants to meet Breezepelt.*

With this in mind, I turned back to my son, simply shrugging to him and nodding eagerly. "He's right there. Go ahead if you want to!" I mouthed to Swiftpaw.

I then rolled my eyes as Swiftpaw seemed to give me a look of annoyance. But luckily, just a moment later I watched him let out a sigh and give what looked like a nod of farewell to the apprentices he was talking to.

My heart then began to beat faster as Swiftpaw then backed away from the huddle, realizing that he was actually going to do it. *I never thought I'd see the day that Swiftpaw would introduce himself to his father...*

So, to say the least, I was very eager to see how this was going to play out.

Chapter 7

[image]

Swiftpaw's POV

Considering I was a cat that had trained in the Dark Forest with many potentially dangerous cats for moons now, one would think that something like talking to my father wouldn't be so daunting.

But *also* considering our circumstances, it very much was. I had never felt nerves like this before - the kind of nerves that overtake your excitement and eagerness, and you actually forget that you're excited about it.

But... am I excited? I asked myself. *I'm terrified, I know that for sure. I didn't even realize that I might be able to meet Breezepelt at my first Gathering until I saw WindClan on the island.*

As I padded closer and closer to the black WindClan tom, my heart seemed to be beating faster and faster. *Will he like me?* I couldn't help but wonder. *Will he even recognize me? Will he be bitter because Goldenshine took me into ThunderClan rather than giving me to him?*

I decided that hopefully all of these questions would be answered once I actually *talked* to the guy, which I realized couldn't be achieved yet from how slowly I was stepping. I let out an annoyed huff and began to walk faster again.

How ridiculous would that look to Breezepelt if I looked like this pitiful apprentice, reluctantly walking up to him and staring at him with wide eyes? I asked myself as I managed one last quick glance at Goldenshine, who was still watching me from afar, her gray eyes clearly glinting with eagerness and urgency. *Great StarClan, give me strength.*

Once I finally arrived to Breezepelt, he was exchanging farewells with a pale tabby she-cat who then padded off into the crowd.

My heart nearly dropped as I then realized that Breezepelt was now alone, and I was the only one standing in front of him. There was no turning back now.

He's my father, I told myself. *And we're both training in the Dark Forest together. This was going to happen sometime, and I'm not going to be scared. I'm* going *to talk to my father.* But as I met Breezepelt's hard amber gaze, talking was suddenly the last thing that my brain wanted to do. I opened my mouth to speak, but I found that nothing would come out. I simply watched as my father stared back at me, looking extremely confused.

But he *also* said nothing.

Does he know who I am, or will I have to explain? "Uh..." I began, my paws shifting back and forth awkwardly. But, I cut myself off from saying anything else as I saw Breezepelt's eyes flash with what looked like shock and realization.

The black tom then shook his head quickly, his eyes widening before they fell into two amber slits. "You're not just some random apprentice trying to make friends, are you?" he finally murmured, his tail twitching. "I know you."

My ears flicked, shocked at hearing my father's voice for the first time. *We're beginning to sound similar,* I realized before murmuring back, "Definitely not." I then took a deep breath, forcing myself to fully meet Breezepelt's gaze. "I'm... I'm your son."

Although it had seemed already that Breezepelt recognized me, my words made his ears flick and his eyes widen like he had only just found out the information. I actually found myself trying to suppress a purr of amusement as he then began to scan his gaze around the clearing, stopping once he had found my mother from many foxlengths away.

Not shockingly, Goldenshine still seemed to be taking side glances towards us, desperate to see how we were interacting. My mother gave Breezepelt a very soft nod before turning back to who she was talking to.

Breezepelt then turned back to me, his eyes now huge. He simply stared at me for many heartbeats before taking a deep breath and letting his gaze soften, though there was still a very shocked and strained look in his eyes.

I found myself tensing up, almost feeling like Breezepelt was going to send me away. *I mean, I'm the son to him and a she-cat from another Clan. I wouldn't be surprised if the thought of me completely disgusted him...*

But to my surprise, I looked back up at my father to see him nodding his head slowly. "Goldenshine said that she named you Swiftkit," he whispered, his head tilting slightly to the side.

I shrugged, my gaze flitting from Breezepelt and to the ground. "Yeah... well, Swiftpaw now," I replied.

"You've grown," Breezepelt then commented as his amber gaze burned into me.

I couldn't help but let out a quiet snort. *Well I'd hope so, considering the last time you saw me was the night I was born!*

But I didn't dare verbalize my sarcastic remark, knowing full well that a short temper and a sort-of prickly sensitivity was something that my father and I shared. "I've been an apprentice for almost a moon now," I meowed, trying to puff out my chest and lift up my chin. *Does this look impressive, or stupid? Or both? Or neither?*

I didn't know if I was disappointed or happy to see the glint of humor in Breezepelt's gaze. "I see," he muttered back. "You look strong, a bit of ThunderClan and WindClan in you..."

I let out a shocked grunt. *I'm surprised that he would even bring up the fact that I'm half-Clan.*
"The other apprentices, and even some warriors, envy me for my long legs," I managed to purr, my gaze falling on my appendages for just a heartbeat. "They'll definitely be of good use in the future!"

After that, Breezepelt simply nodded, and I found myself trying to ignore a tug that I was suddenly feeling. I wanted to say more, to

talk more to the tom that was my other parent. But... as fairly friendly as Breezepelt had been, I felt as if a long, deeper exchange would have taken moons to achieve.

Just as I was about to open my mouth as an attempt to carry on a conversation, a yowl came from the Great Oak where the four leaders were now settled.

"The Gathering will now begin!" Blackstar called out to the island.

Trying to push down my disappointment, I watched as Breezepelt gave me a nod in farewell, then ran over to join his Clanmates. I stared off at him for a few heartbeats before doing the same, settling down next to Snowpaw.

Once the Gathering got started, and each Clan leader spoke, their words seemed to go in one ear and out the other, as I was stuck in my own head, replaying the encounter with my father over and over again. Why had it all seemed so tense? *It doesn't seem like he's bothered by me or the fact that my mother, his former mate, is from another Clan. He brought up my half-Clan heritage for StarClan's sake!* I thought to myself. *So, why does he still seemed so hostile and closed off?*

A chill then ran down my spine as I realized something, just as Firestar, the last leader who needed to speak, stepped forward. *I suppose being hostile and tense is how I am most of the time,* I thought. *I wonder if Breezepelt is as affected by training in the Dark Forest as I am? But surely he's not being trapped by a cat who wants revenge. So... what's his story?*

I let out a sigh as I stood up, the Clans having been dismissed from the island. *Whatever. What's done is done,* I told myself. *You're acting like this is the only time you'll ever get to talk to Breezepelt, but surely you'll be able to bond in the Dark Forest.* I snorted as I then thought, *I suppose that's one positive to going there. And I'll get to see how Breezepelt has been fairing there.*

"Swiftpaw!"

I shook my head quickly, and then averted my gaze from where I

had been staring ahead to see Snowpaw looking back at me, her blue eyes glinting with frustration.

She had rolled her eyes once I looked back at her. "Great StarClan, finally!" she breathed. "That was the fourth or fifth time I tried to get your attention. I'm surprised you haven't tripped over any roots yet!"

Processing Snowpaw's words, I let out a gasp and quickly glanced around my surroundings, noticing that we were already arriving into the ThunderClan forest. *Wow, time sure does fly when you're stuck in your thoughts.*

"Sorry," I murmured, lightly flicking Snowpaw's ear with my tail. "What's going on?"

I couldn't help but narrow my eyes as I saw the suspicious glow in my friend's eye, the playfulness completely gone already. "Well... I just wanted to ask," she began, her tail tip twitching as my own heart began to nervously beat faster. "Why were you talking to Breezepelt? That was Breezepelt, right?"

Shoot, I didn't even think about how I would explain this to any cat who noticed me, I thought irritably. *Quick wit, don't disappoint me!* "Um..." I murmured, trying not to let Snowpaw see how anxious I was. "He just seemed cool, I guess."

"You definitely could describe him as *cool*," Snowpaw agreed, to my relief. But that relief went away immediately as her gaze didn't change. "But he's certainly not the warmest cat you could introduce yourself to, you'd have to be pretty brave to do that."

Before I could open my mouth in protest, Snowpaw rolled her eyes and raised her tail to my face to silence me. "Not that you're not brave or anything," she conceded, a bit of laughter in her voice. "But I just feel like if one were to talk to Breezepelt willingly, there'd have to be a pretty good reason."

I shrugged, deciding to stick with my original excuse. "Well, my pretty good reason was that I thought he seemed cool," I meowed, trying to keep my voice even.

My heart continued to beat quickly as Snowpaw's narrowed gaze continued to burn into me. *Why is she so suspicious, and what reason does she have to be?* I thought as the two of us crawled through the gorse tunnel and into the nearly empty camp clearing. *Well, there are reasons, but she isn't aware of any of them!*

"Whatever," Snowpaw then muttered as she brushed past me, trotting towards the apprentices den. "You're weird!"

I managed to let out a purr of amusement. "You're weirder!" I called back, now feeling satisfied that the seemingly off-mood of our encounter had been broken.

I followed Snowpaw a little more slowly towards the apprentices den, briefly pausing as I passed the medicine den, feeling a small pang of worry and sympathy as I saw Cherrykit curled up with Poppyfrost. Unfortunately for me, the queen lifted her head, her eyes narrowing as I passed by and took a glance inside.

"Hello, Swiftpaw," the tortoiseshell she-cat meowed tautly.

"Hello, Poppyfrost," I meowed back, dipping my head, trying to be polite in order to wipe away today's earlier encounter. "How is Cherrykit?"

Leafpool, who was serving as the medicine cat during the Gathering, padded up to Cherrykit's and Poppyfrost's nest, holding out some leaves to Cherrykit with one of her paws. "She has whitecough," the former medicine cat answered sadly as Cherrykit licked up the herbs.

Oh, no! Poor Cherrykit, I thought worriedly, hating for my former denmate to have to suffer so much so young. "Will she be alright?" I asked anxiously.

My gaze flicked from Leafpool to Poppyfrost as I noticed her roll her eyes and sniff. "I don't know, Swiftpaw, she might cough again," he muttered bitterly, her eyes filled with as much anger as they had earlier in the day. "I know that's quite the burden for you."

Are you kidding me? I thought as I let out an offended hiss. "But I

wasn't-" I began to growl before cutting myself off, knowing that there truly was no way I could explain myself. *But I wasn't talking to your daughter!*

I was then pulled from my frustrated thoughts as I heard Cherrykit's voice. "It's alright, Swiftpaw!" she meowed cheerfully. "Coughing can be pretty annoying."

"But it should be tolerated when a cat is *sick!*" Poppyfrost exclaimed through wide eyes, looking shocked that Cherrykit was being so forgiving. I was pretty surprised too, to be honest.

I then let out a huff as I grew increasingly more frustrated with Poppyfrost's grudge. "Look, I'm sorry," I murmured, taking another step into the medicine den. "I-*Ow!*" I then hissed as I felt a familiar type of pain strike my ear. *You have got to stop doing that when I'm in the middle of a sentence!*

Realizing that Ashfur was trying to tell me something, I then let out a curt nod, not waiting for any response for my brief apology or the fact that I had just hissed out of nowhere, before turning and leaving the den. Because, according to Ashfur, showing vulnerability towards other cats was only veering me off course. *And I have to listen to him.*

"Thanks for coming to visit, Swiftpaw!" I heard Cherrykit call out hoarsely.

"Cherrykit, hush!" I then heard Poppyfrost hiss. "You'll never get better if you strain your voice like that!"

I tried my hardest to suppress a purr of amusement as I finally crawled into the apprentices den. *At least Cherrykit seems to be in good spirits,* I realized as I got settled into my nest. *Oh, I hope she gets better soon.*

Before lying my head down, I slowly glanced around at the apprentices den. In a nest near mine, Snowpaw was curled up into a little ball, clearly asleep by the slow rising and falling of her flank.

A little ways away were Dovepaw and Ivypaw in their own nests,

and they were also fast asleep. My gaze rested on the beautiful silver tabby and white pelt of Ivypaw. I found myself, for some reason, feeling a pang of disappointment as I remembered that she was going to be a warrior soon, and in ThunderClan at least, we wouldn't be able to ever train together again.

I then let out a snort as I finally lowered my head down. *Maybe that's for the best*, I told myself as I closed my eyes. *Clearly Ivypaw has been a bit of a distraction to me, and I don't even want to admit why...*

I then felt myself almost sinking lower into my nest, growing more comfortable as I fell into sleep.

But I already knew that this comfort wouldn't last long at all, being fully aware of where I was going.

Sure enough, just moments after my eyes closed, they opened again, and I found myself in the same clearing Ashfur and I always trained in.

Since finding out Ashfur's true motives for bringing me here, I had been able to realize what true dread felt like as I was taken into the Dark Forest every night. *It feels more scary, as if that's even possible,* I admitted to myself. *But if I try to run or avoid anything that Ashfur throws my way, it could cost me my life.*

But since training in the Dark Forest, I had not only learned some very helpful fighting moves, but I had also worked on how to hide fear extremely well. So, when Ashfur finally emerged from some brambles, I was sure that I looked as ready as any other trainee.

"Come with me, Swiftpaw," Ashfur commanded after we had exchanged our typical greeting. "Now that you are deeper in your apprentice training in ThunderClan, it is vital that you really begin to get used to practicing with many different cats."

More group training, I see, I thought to myself as Ashfur then led me through the forest, twisting around many trees, bushes and brambles. *It's intimidating, but it's better than training one-on-one with Ashfur, I suppose.*

"Anyway," Ashfur continued once I had caught up to walk side by side with him. "Clearly you need some more bulking up. Maybe a different approach to training will toughen you."

I couldn't help but let out a contemptuous huff. "You've taken a different approach to teaching me overall, as well," I meowed bitterly, thinking about the nicks Ashfur had been giving me on the ear whenever I seemed to be doing something that he didn't like.

"How else am I supposed to get your attention during the day?" Ashfur hissed back as a large group of cats came in sight up ahead. "I told you, as long as you're under my training, I'm going to make sure that you focus on what's really important."

Trying to ignore the very ominous look that Ashfur was giving me, I simply gave him a nod as we finally arrived to the clearing of cats.

My eyes were overwhelmed by the countless colors of pelts that I saw. I could just barely see Thornclaw in the distance, along with Mousewhisker... Blossomfall... Birchfall...

And my heart nearly stopped as I realized that a certain cat was staring right back at me as my gaze fell on her. My stomach twisted up into a knot when I recognized Ivypaw, her dark blue eyes very intense, so much so that I couldn't even guess what she was thinking.

Although I couldn't help but feel slightly excited at the fact that she was looking at me, it probably wasn't for the reason that I would want. So, I nervously gave the she-cat a quick nod before continuing to follow Ashfur and look around. *That definitely wasn't a gaze of affection or admiration... is there a burr in my fur or something?*

I then nearly stopped in my tracks again as my eyes caught sight of a cat I had only just been talking to earlier - Breezepelt, who seemed to be in deep into a training session with Brokenstar. I was startled as I noticed the clear gleam of maliciousness and anger that was blazing in Breezepelt's amber eyes as the Dark Forest spirit talked to him.

"Come on, Breezepelt. You should know by now how much more

you are, and how much more you can be... what you can do for us," Brokenstar was meowing in quite the menacing tone.

"Right," Breezepelt muttered as he unsheathed his claws, his eyes still glowing with a bone-chilling type of determination.

"Crowfeather only makes you feel worthless, unwanted," Brokenstar continued. "You don't need that. You don't need his approval, not when you have ours."

"No, I don't!" Breezepelt then hissed, looking enraged as he slashed at some dead grass on the ground with a paw.

My mouth dropped at the scene in front of me. *Why is Breezepelt so angry?* I wondered fearfully, feeling extremely uneasy about what I had just witnessed.

"Swiftpaw, come on!" I heard Ashfur call, annoyed, from a few tail-lengths ahead. I looked up to see that the tom was standing with a few other Dark Forest cats, along with Blossomfall and Mousewhisker. "We're waiting for you."

"Coming..." I murmured as I ran up to meet the gathered cats. But as I did so, my gaze was not able to break from my father, who seemed to be growing more ambitious and malevolent with every word that Brokenstar said to him. It had been incredibly hard to watch.

It does appear as that Breezepelt carries his share of burdens... I realized, reflecting on how much hate my father clearly had for *his* father, Crowfeather. *No wonder he was so closed-off at the Gathering. His relationship with Crowfeather, or rather the lack of it, has been clearly weighing on him for moons, and it has brought out the worst in him. I've known for a while that Breezepelt trained here, but I've just learned that he is here with some intent that the Dark Forest has helped him to see.*

As I then tried to invest myself into the group training session taking place, I couldn't help but wonder, *Great StarClan... if I go on like this, which I suppose I have to... how long will it be until I crack like that?*

Chapter 8

[image]

Goldenshine's POV

"Goldenshine, will you calm down?" Jayfeather hissed back at me. "Stop meowing nonsense and take a breath!"

I let out a snort as I followed Jayfeather into the medicine den. "I'm hardly meowing nonsense!" I exclaimed as I crawled through the bramble screen. "How am I supposed to react when I find out you're leaving out of nowhere?"

"I *have* to go!" Jayfeather insisted, lashing his tail irritably. "What am I, your mother? Why is it such a big deal to you?"

Why is it such a big deal? I repeated in my mind as worry and frustration bubbled up inside of me. *Sure, the fact that you're my friend and you're suddenly leaving is one thing, but you've also been my cohort in trying to figure out this Snowpaw situation!*

I had only just woken up at dawn, about a quarter moon after the Gathering, when I had actually overheard Jayfeather's conversation with Squirrelflight, Dovewing, who had been made a warrior a few days ago, and Foxleap - telling them that he was being called to the Tribe of Rushing Water, and that they were going with him.

Once their little gathering had dispersed, I had approached the gray tabby medicine cat, already delving into a deep panic at the news. And, of course now, Jayfeather wasn't quite getting why, but I had every reason to be!

Sure, Jayfeather and I shared pretty much the same amount of information when it came to Snowpaw and the spirit that she carried... but what if something happened while Jayfeather was gone, when he and I were some of the only ones that knew about Snowpaw's real identity? I surely would have no idea what to make of it by myself!

So, I expressed this to Jayfeather. "It's a big deal because I'm not a medicine cat!"

Jayfeather rolled his eyes. "Oh, I know *that*," he muttered before beginning to dig through some of his herbs. After I let out an annoyed huff, he then meowed, "Your point?"

"How will I be able to further understand what's going on with Snowpaw without you?" I answered, trying to keep my voice down despite my anxiety. "I'm not a medicine cat like you; I can't interpret weird signs and stuff."

Jayfeather snorted. "Well, you're definitely nowhere near being a medicine cat if you're calling prophecies 'weird signs and stuff'..."

"Jayfeather!" I then nearly shouted, growing more and more nervous with every heartbeat. *For once, I want you to take what I'm saying seriously, not as a joke!*

"Great StarClan!" Jayfeather breathed before putting down the herbs he was tampering with and turning towards me. "Goldenshine, as much as it... *pains* me to say it - you're a smart cat." I then tilted my head and narrowed my eyes as Jayfeather sniffed and seemed to gesture his head to the side, I assumed towards the apprentices den. "Well, about some things, at least."

"Having a kit with a cat from another Clan hardly applies here!" I hissed to Jayfeather through gritted teeth.

"Whatever. All I'm trying to say is that you'll be fine," Jayfeather meowed, flicking my ear with his tail. "Anyway, what are you even expecting to happen?"

I snorted and shrugged. "I don't know! What if she does something strange or cryptic - something that only you would understand?" I asked Jayfeather, my nerves beginning to rise up again despite the medicine cat's reassurance.

"If that's the case, all you need to do is tell me once I get back."

"But only StarClan knows *when* you're coming back!"

Jayfeather then let out an exasperated sigh, and I couldn't help but feel a small twinge of guilt for how much I was pestering him. "Well, I *am* coming back," Jayfeather murmured in his usual prickly tone. "And once I do, you'll be able to tell me anything that has happened."

Well, it's not like I'd ever have the audacity to keep Jayfeather away from his calling to the mountains, I told myself, knowing that I would have to comply with his words. What could possibly happen with Snowpaw while Jayfeather was gone, anyway? And Snowflight was my sister - if she were going to try to send me any sort of sign, I hopefully would be able to understand them if they were from her.

Also, Snowpaw is just training to be a warrior right now. She's very busy! I may not even see her that much, I realized as I found myself beginning to finally calm down. *If anything, you should be worrying about the fact that some of your Clanmates are venturing out to the mountains during leaf-bare!*

Almost as if my thoughts were a cue, a rustle came from the entrance of the medicine den, and I turned to see Dovewing, Squirrelflight and Foxleap making their way in.

Even if I still was having doubts about Jayfeather leaving me to deal with Snowpaw, I certainly wouldn't be able to express it anymore! I realized as I nodded my head in greeting to the three cats.

"Hi, Goldenshine!" Squirrelflight purred to me before padding up to Jayfeather. "Are our traveling herbs ready?"

"Right here," Jayfeather muttered, grabbing some leaves from his stash and walking up to the patrol.

As the medicine cat was beginning to distribute the herbs to Foxleap, Dovewing and Squirrelflight, I decided to dip my head in farewell and leave them all be. *Jayfeather especially. I hammered the poor cat before he has to leave on a long journey!*

"I wish you all luck on your journey," I meowed, nodding my head to every cat in the den. "May StarClan light your path."

"And yours too!" I heard Dovewing purr as I slithered through the medicine entrance and back out into the camp. I then took a deep breath, looking up at the sky that was beginning to grow paler and paler as the sun rose. *Oh, StarClan, be with me, please!* I prayed to them, sitting down just a few tail-lengths from the medicine den. *Jayfeather says that I'll be fine, but I'll still need your guidance with Snowpaw while I'm overseeing her alone.*

Yes, Jayfeather had managed to calm my nerves a little bit, but my stomach still felt as if it had been twisted in countless knots whenever I envisioned the possibility of something happening while he was gone.

And what about that look that Snowpaw was giving Swiftpaw not too long ago? I recalled. *It was so...* antagonistic. *I'd give away all of the prey in this forest if it meant I could find out what she was thinking in that moment, and if it meant any more about why Snowflight is here...*

I then shook my head quickly. *Goldenshine, you are going to be fine*, I told myself. *You are a strong, brave, quick-thinking warrior. You can take on whatever is thrown at you. Snowflight would want you to handle her situation with grace if it was possible.*

I then attempted to release some of my stress through a deep breath. *Everything will become clear.*

As I was then filled with a bit of ease, my ears pricked when I noticed movement from the warriors den out of the corner of my eye. I turned my head to see the very familiar sandy-gray pelt of Dustystorm, emerging from the den before taking a long stretch.

I felt a purr begin to throb in my throat as my eyes fell on my mate. *And this tom will give me more strength than I could ever ask for.*

Trying to suppress a purr of amusement, and trying to make my movements as quiet as possible, I lowered down into a crouch and slithered to the side of the warriors den, just behind where Dustystorm was now doing a quick grooming.

Without risking another moment, I sprang and let out a triumphant yowl as I managed to bowl over Dustystorm. Then, that yowl turned

into a *mrrow* of laughter once I was able to see the look on his face and the alarm in his blue eyes as I pinned him down.

But almost immediately, the alarm in my mate's eyes faded, and was replaced with humor and affection. "Well, if there was any exhaustion left in me, you've scared it all away!" he purred, batting at my face with a sheathed paw.

"Kind of the point!" I winked at Dustystorm, and as he let out an amused huff, I bent my head down and brushed my muzzle against his cheek. "Good morning."

My stomach then seemed to flutter as Dustystorm licked my cheek, a purr rumbling in his throat. "Good morning to you, too," he meowed softly. I then purred with amusement once again as Dustystorm nodded his head to the ground and meowed, "As much as I... *love* being pinned to the cold, snowy ground, could you let me up, please?"

"Aw, you're no fun!" I purred, leaping off of the gray tom and shaking out my fur. I then dug my head into Dustystorm's chest fur as he pressed himself against me.

"If *fun* constitutes freezing to death, then yes, I am no fun at all!" Dustystorm teased before licking my head.

I then heard my mate let out what sounded like a confused grunt, so I pulled away to meet his gaze. "What?" I questioned, flicking my ears with curiosity.

I then watched as Dustystorm nodded to something ahead, and I averted my gaze to see that Jayfeather's patrol was now out in the clearing once again, talking to Firestar as he seemed to be giving them his farewell.

"What's going on?" Dustystorm then asked, his eyes narrowing. "Surely the dawn patrol isn't going out this late?"

I nodded as I gave Dustystorm a light nudge. "And you would be correct," I replied. "That's because they're going to the Tribe of Rushing Water."

I then had to suppress a purr of amusement as Dustystorm's eyes grew so wide that I thought they would fall out of his head. "Those cats that live in the mountains?" he exclaimed, his mouth dropping. "No way! How come?"

It was then that I realized that despite talking to Jayfeather, I was still just as unaware of why he and the others were leaving as Dustystorm was. *Yes, Jayfeather said that he was being called to the mountains, but for what?*

"I wish I knew why!" I finally answered my mate, shaking my head slowly as I watched more cats began to gather, giving the patrol their goodbyes. I then sighed, letting my head fall on Dustystorm's shoulder. "I sure hope that they return home safely."

"They will," Dustystorm meowed calmly, resting his muzzle on my head.

I took comfort in my mate's scent and his touch as I let my gaze continue to scan the camp. And almost just as my gaze fell on the apprentices den, Swiftpaw and Snowpaw crawled out, the two of them now being the only apprentices in ThunderClan.

I then watched as Swiftpaw's eyes seemed to flash with surprise and alarm, seeing his mentor surrounded by many cats. My son didn't waste any time trying to find out what was going on, and immediately ran up to Foxleap. As the two of them talked, Swiftpaw still had a fearful gleam in his eye, and it didn't seem to go away until Foxleap gave Swiftpaw a nod in farewell.

I was puzzled as to why Swiftpaw seemed to be so nervous that Foxleap was leaving. *I'm sure Foxleap is a great mentor, and Swiftpaw would be sad to see him leave for a bit, but what's so scary about having a new mentor for a little while?*

It was just heartbeats later that I found out that Dustystorm was thinking just as I was. "Great StarClan, I guess Swiftpaw is going to have a new mentor, isn't he?" he observed out loud, staring off at my son as his eyes glittered with amusement. "I wonder who will replace Foxleap?"

Maybe someone who will knock the cold attitude out of him.

I continued to watch, intrigued, as Firestar then called Swiftpaw over, beckoning the dark gray apprentice with his tail. Swiftpaw gave Foxleap one last anxious glance as the mountain patrol left, before padding up to the ThunderClan leader.

I said it already, but I'll say it again, I said in my thoughts, watching as the tails of Squirrelflight, Foxleap, Dovewing and Jayfeather disappeared through the tunnel. *May StarClan light your path.*

Once my son settled in front of Firestar, I was then surprised to see the ginger tom turn his head to where Dustystorm and I were sitting. "Dustystorm!" Firestar called, nodding to my mate beside me. "Could you come join me and Swiftpaw, please?"

I purred as Dustystorm's ears shot up, and we exchanged a half-joyed, half-shocked glance. "I think you're about to find out!" I meowed excitedly, answering Dustystorm's earlier question.

I actually felt myself practically wanting to leap up with excitement as I then watched Dustystorm walk up to Firestar and Swiftpaw. *If what I think is happening* is *happening, this is great!* I thought happily. *Swiftpaw would be comfortable with Dustystorm, and I can be certain that he will teach my son well.*

To my surprise, Swiftpaw himself looked relieved. His eyes were glittering with ease, and his demeanor wasn't as tense.

Deciding I wanted to watch this scene further unfold, I took a few steps closer to the three toms, just close enough to where I was in earshot.

Firestar's meow was the first thing I was able to hear clearly. "This will be great preparation for Dustystorm," the ginger tom pointed out, nodding to my mate with a glint of admiration in his green eyes. "I see great promise in him as a mentor in the future, and this will be a great way for him to get started."

I then had to hold back another purr as Dustystorm nodded eagerly, then exchanging a thrilled glance with Swiftpaw. "Wow... thank

you, Firestar," he exclaimed, then padding up to stand next to Swiftpaw. "I won't let either of you down."

"I know you won't," Firestar meowed, dipping his head before beginning to pad up to Brambleclaw, who seemed to be waiting for the ThunderClan leader.

Once the ThunderClan leader was gone, I decided to walk up even closer to Dustystorm and Swiftpaw, trying to push down any reluctance that was there. *Surely Swiftpaw wouldn't show his usual hostility with me in front of Dustystorm?*

"How about you grab a quick meal, and once it gets closer to sunhigh, I'll take you out for some battle training?" Dustystorm was meowing to Swiftpaw as I settled down in front of them.

Swiftpaw didn't acknowledge my presence at all, simply nodding to Dustystorm as his eyes continued to gleam with excitement. "Sounds great, Dustystorm!" my son purred. "I can't wait to-"

I tilted my head to the side, confused, as Swiftpaw then suddenly let out a hiss, his eyes for some reason flashing with rage as he scratched at his ear. Dustystorm and I exchanged a worried glance as Swiftpaw then shook out his fur, his claws unsheathing into the ground.

What's gotten into him? I wondered fearfully, shocked by the sudden change in my son's behavior. *Yes, overall he has been weird lately, but what was with that mood change?*

"You can't wait to... shred your ear off?" Dustystorm meowed, clearly trying to lighten up the suddenly weird mood.

Swiftpaw shut his eyes for a moment, letting out a sigh. "No," he muttered before padding away towards the fresh-kill pile. "I'll be ready soon."

"Okay, then," Dustystorm murmured, half to himself before turning back to me.

Being as bewildered as he was, I gave my mate a shrug. "Well... he scratched his ear, didn't he? Maybe it's been bothering him," I

rationalized to Dustystorm, even though I knew that I was trying to tell myself that more than him. *I've never seen an itchy ear make a cat so angry though...*

Luckily, Dustystorm didn't seem to let Swiftpaw's strange behavior get to him. A purr rumbled in my throat as Dustystorm flicked his tail, his blue eyes glowing with determination. "No big deal," he meowed definitively. "I'll get that son of yours to have a little fun!"

"Freezing to death kind of fun?" I managed to tease, reprising our joke from earlier.

"Great StarClan," Dustystorm breathed, rolling his eyes as he pressed his muzzle to mine. "Whatever fun that will pull Swiftpaw out of that sour mood he's always carrying!"

So Dustystorm notices how tense Swiftpaw too? I wondered. *So Snowpaw isn't the only one? Great StarClan, is it that bad?*

"And you're going to give me a full, thorough report of every single training session you all have!" I joked as Dustystorm pulled away. *Although... I may not exactly be joking. I would love to hear how Swiftpaw behaves with Dustystorm... anything to find out what's going on with my son and why he's been acting the way that he is.*

As Dustystorm then licked my cheek in farewell, joining Swiftpaw by the fresh-kill pile, I let out an exasperated huff.

Maybe this is a good thing, I tried to tell myself. *Dustystorm, being the bright, determined, and loyal tom that he is, might be a good influence on Swiftpaw!*

I lashed my tail with satisfaction as I stood up. *Maybe things will begin to get better.*

Chapter 9

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

I let out a shaky sigh and exchanged an anxious glance with Whitewing as the two of us sat near the fresh-kill pile, watching Brightheart and Leafpool moving quickly back and forth through the swarm of cats in the medicine clearing.

"Well, we're sure full of luck this leaf-bare, aren't we?" Whitewing breathed, then taking another bite of the vole we were sharing.

I nodded slowly as I shoved the vole over to the white she-cat, my appetite beginning to fade with the amount of worry I was feeling. "Oh, Whitewing, if only you weren't being sarcastic," I replied, lying my head on my friend's shoulder. *And as negative as it is to say, it's only just the beginning!*

It had only been a few days since Jayfeather, along with Squirrelflight, Dovewing and Foxleap, had left for the mountains, and already, I knew that the medicine cat's absence definitely wasn't going to go unnoticed.

Just about a full day after the four cats had left, the whitecough that had only been seen in Cherrykit up until then had begun to spread. As far as I knew, there were only a few cats being cared for in the medicine den, but it was certainly still enough to make me worry, especially when leaf-bare was only just arriving.

It is only whitecough; things could be a lot worse! I tried to tell myself as I took a deep breath. *But... whitecough can turn into greencough.*

A shiver ran down my spine as I then remembered the first time I had witnessed an outbreak of greencough in ThunderClan since I had arrived... how incredibly *terrifying* it was to see so many cats suffering at one time, and seeing it spread so quickly. Even Firestar had gotten deeply sick, and I had hated the strong, seemingly

invincible ThunderClan leader looking so weak and defeated.

Oh, StarClan, please don't let ThunderClan fall into something like that again! I prayed to my ancestors.

It was then that I also realized that I had also been expecting kits with the first outbreak of sickness. Trying to suppress a purr of amusement, I then thought jokingly, *my offspring always bring the curse of whitecough, apparently.*

I finally lifted my head from Whitewing's shoulder, taking another deep breath. *Jayfeather may be gone, but Leafpool is a brilliant medicine cat, even if she doesn't have the title anymore, and Brightheart is there to help her.*

Despite these thoughts though, I found myself standing up and taking a few pawsteps forward towards the medicine den. Every sick cat in that den was in very capable paws, I knew that, but if there was any way that I could possibly help the two she-cats, I was going to do it.

I turned back to Whitewing before taking another step. "I'm going to see if Leafpool or Brightheart need any help," I explained to my friend. "Do you want to come with me?"

I then watched as Whitewing shook her head, a glint of regret in her green eyes. "As much as I would love to, I already promised Poppyfrost that I would watch Molekit while she's with Cherrykit in the medicine den."

"Alright, that's okay!" I purred, before letting out a small snort. "So, in a way, you're already helping!"

Whitewing purred with amusement. "I guess so!" the she-cat meowed before dipping her head to me and padding toward the nursery. "I'll see you later, Lilypetal."

"Bye!" I called back before practically leaping towards the medicine den. But, it only took me a heartbeat for me to realize that I probably needed to calm down just a little bit - one, for the sake of my kits, and two, because another frantic cat worrying about the

sickness probably wasn't what the two acting medicine cats needed...

A little more steadily, I padded up to the entrance of the medicine den, only peeking inside. *No way am I going to risk getting my kits sick. Hopefully whatever Leafpool and Brightheart have me do can be from a distance.*

"Lilypetal!"

A cry from what sounded like Leafpool cut me off from my thoughts, and I averted my gaze slightly to see the tabby and white she-cat staring back at me, her eyes wide.

"What are you doing in here? Don't get too close!" she demanded, dropping the herbs she had been carrying in her jaws. I then watched as her amber eyes widened fearfully. "Great StarClan, you're not feeling sick, are you?"

"No, don't worry!" I insisted immediately, knowing that there could be no time to spare answering a question like that. "And I'll keep my distance. But I wanted to help - if I can."

I then gasped as I got a good look at what was going on in the medicine den for the first time - as I had thought, there were only a few cats in the den, but none of them were looking good, their fur matted to their bodies as they rolled around uncomfortably in their nests.

The sight horrified me, but simultaneously gave me another spark of determination. I met Leafpool's gaze again, giving her a definitive nod. "I really want to help," I repeated sharply.

Leafpool exchanged a wary glance with Brightheart before nodding back to me, already looking more relaxed. "You actually came just in time - our stock of catmint is getting low," the former medicine cat meowed, lashing her tail towards the stacks of herbs. "If you're up to it, would you be able to go to the abandoned Twoleg nest and grab some?"

I flicked my ears and nodded eagerly. "Am I *up* to it? Of course I

am!" I exclaimed before whipping myself around and quickly trotting away from the den entrance. "I'll be right back!"

So excited to have a task that I knew would benefit many cats, I padded as quickly as I could through the camp clearing, then through the camp entrance. I then broke into a run, taking advantage of my burst of energy. *If I feel well enough to run, then I might as well run!*

I had just zipped past the training hollow when I noticed a cluster of pelts just a few fox-lengths ahead, and I skidded to a halt to meet the patrol I had run into. Thornclaw was at the front, with Dustpelt, Cloudtail and Brackenfur just behind him.

"Lilypetal!" Thornclaw exclaimed, his eyes wide with concern as I shook the snow from my fur. "Where in the name of StarClan are you going?"

I let out a faint purr of amusement as I touched my nose to my mate's, then nodding in greeting to the rest of the patrol. "I'm going to the abandoned Twoleg nest to get some catmint for Leafpool and Brightheart," I explained, nodding ahead. I then cut off Thornclaw by raising my tail, knowing that he would probably try to object. "I just wanted to help."

Thornclaw still looked like he wanted to object for a heartbeat, but he then let out a huff and touched his muzzle to my cheek. "Okay," he breathed, still sounding wary. He then pulled away to meet my gaze. "Just be careful, alright?"

"Of course," I meowed softly, rubbing my cheek to Thornclaw's briefly. "I wouldn't dream of putting our kits in danger."

Thornclaw snorted as I pulled away. "Of course," he agreed, his eyes glowing with love and tenderness before he then insisted, "But there's also the she-cat that's carrying them!"

"Good point," I heard Cloudtail mutter.

I flashed the white tom an amused glance before looking back at Thornclaw. "Don't worry!" I purred. "I'll be there and back at the

blink of an eye!"

I lashed my tail with contentment as Thornclaw finally seemed to comply with my words, his worried gaze softening. "Alright," he meowed, gesturing his tail to the forest ahead as his eyes gleamed with humor. "Get going, so that I can go ahead and start worrying."

"Oh, goodness," I breathed, touching my nose to my mate's one last time as the other toms on patrol quietly purred with amusement. I then turned to them and dipped my head in farewell. "You all stay safe as well!"

Just barely waiting for their responses, I then turned around and begun to make my way through the forest again. While I was still in earshot, I managed to catch a few entertaining words from Thornclaw's patrol.

"Great StarClan, having a mate has sure made you soft, hasn't it?" I heard Cloudtail tease.

"I'm *sorry*, is it wrong to show concern for the cat that I love?" Thornclaw then meowed back to the white warrior. I tried to suppress a *mrrow* of laughter that would reveal that I was listening.

"Not at all," Dustpelt then responded. "But we're just saying, Lilypetal managed to smooth down some fur that seemed to constantly be bristling!"

Hm, that's how I roll! I thought jokingly before picking up the pace so that I could make up for some lost time.

Soon enough, I arrived to the abandoned Twoleg nest. Immediately, I walked in a slow circle around the structure, scanning my eyes around for the familiar plant. But, it didn't take me long to realize that there was absolutely none.

Foxdung! I thought irritably, trying to push down a great amount of anxiety. *Leafpool and Brightheart will* need *catmint if these cats are going to get better.*

I began pacing, the blood roaring in my ears as I desperately tried to decide what to do. *There has to be another place close by with*

catmint!

My ears then flicked as a possibility crossed my mind - not one that I particularly liked, or would enjoy, but the fear of coming back to the medicine den empty-pawed was too great.

My old greenleaf Twoleg nest, I told myself, letting out a huff as I reluctantly began to travel that way.

As much as I would hate the expedition, I knew that catmint typically grew in Twoleg yards, or right up against fences. Having been a kittypet for a while, the sight and smell of catmint was unmistakable to me now.

The entire travel to the Twoleg nest consisted of me baring my teeth at my numbing paws, and also trying to push down my unwillingness. Padding up the designated trail that led to the nest was the most difficult part. *It seems that every time I walk down this trail, I do it in the hopes of never seeing it again,* I thought. *But here we are!*

Once the greenleaf nest came into side, my heart almost instantly seemed to sink into the deep, white snow, as I saw that there seemed to be no catmint surrounding the white fence.

I couldn't help but let out an exasperated sigh, knowing what I was probably going to have to do next, which was to leap over the fence and look inside of the yard. Once, leaping back into a yard from the outer side of the fence would have been very exciting for me, because it meant that I was safe from any dangers of the wilderness. *Who knew that one day I'd dread it more than anything?*

I trotted quickly up to the white picket fence, but paused just as I was about to take a leap.

I took a few pawsteps backwards before warily walking over to the other side of the nest, where I remembered the driveway being.

Yes, I still remember the term *driveway*. I was disgusted with myself.

I peered over from where I was standing to see that the driveway

was empty - not a monster in sight.

Good, I meowed, giving one nod of satisfication. *That means that Twolegs aren't home at the moment, or not here at all!*

I ran back to my original spot and then leaped to the top of the fence without any hesitation.

I landed steadily at the top, briefly acknowledging the fact that the last time I was at the top of this fence, had been the last time I was at the top of this fence as a *kittypet. How weird is that? Goodness, have I-GAH!*

I then nearly fell off of the fence as the bark of a dog startled me like I had never been before. But, I managed to catch myself, sink my claws into the clean-cut tree, and *calm down* slightly.

But my tranquility only lasted about a heartbeat as suddenly a creature burst from the back door. I felt my fur began to bristle as the dog then ran up to the fence, going berserk with its barking. The dog was fairly small and lean, with ginger and white fur, floppy ears, and a long face.

Oh, no! What do I do now? I thought in dismay, my head beginning to spin. *I either fight the dog, and risk hurting my kits, or I leave and risk my Clanmates getting worse!*

Luckily, I didn't have to choose, as another sound came from the back door.

"Good gosh, Millie! Knock it off!"

Hm, I much prefer the cat Millie.

I then watched in surprise as a cat emerged from a small slot in the back door. *Huh... that wasn't there when I was a kittypet,* I thought jokingly. *I could have wandered off into the forest much earlier if I'd had that!*

But I quickly shook that thought away, bringing my focus to the cat that had just appeared into my sight and was padding quickly into the yard, its tail twitching impatiently.

It was a tom, maybe just fairly younger than I was. He had black and white fur, with a pattern that happened to be similar to mine. I simply stared down at him as he arrived at the bottom of the fence.

"I'm so sorry about the dog!" the kittypet meowed.

Yeah, me too.

"She really is harmless. If you had let a claw slip out, she'd run right back inside." the tom continued, winking at me.

I then couldn't help but purr with amusement as the tom turned to face the dog and hissed, resulting in Millie cowering back and letting out a small whimper before walking pitifully back inside through the small slot.

The tom watched the dog's tail disappear through the door, shaking his head slowly, before turning back to me. "Anyway, I don't think I've seen you around here yet," the tom observed, then snorting and lashing his tail. "I'm surprised there are any cats around here. My housefolk were wacky enough to come out to the lake during leaf-bare. How crazy is that?"

I flashed the tom a look of sympathy. "Pretty frustrating, I'm sure!" I commented, then beginning to finally scan the yard in search of catmint. "And actually, I'm a wild cat - I don't live with housefolk." *Anymore, thank StarClan.*

I then couldn't suppress another purr as the tom's green eyes widened. "A wild cat? No way!" he breathed. "What brings you here, then?"

I hesitated slightly, wondering how much I should give away. "Well... a few cats that I know are very sick," I answered, my ears flicking when I caught sight of the herb I was looking for just tail-lengths behind the kittypet. "I was hoping you could spare some of your plants?"

The tom followed my gaze, glancing back at the large stock of catmint that was growing along the fence. "Oh, the catmint?" he meowed, then turning his head back to face me. "I don't need it for

anything. Take as much as you want!"

My eyes widened at the tom's generosity. *The kittypets that I have encountered since becoming a warrior have been pretty snobby, besides Smudge, Nightwing and Dustystorm, obviously,* I realized as I leaped down from the fence. *This is quite a breath of fresh air!*

"Thank you so much. Really," I meowed to the tom, running up to the catmint and snapping off as much as I could with my claws.

"Sure," the tom meowed, padding up to sit near me and watch me pick at the plants. "I'd give assistance to anyone, but the fact that you're a wild cat makes it even cooler! What's your name?"

"I'm Lilypetal," I meowed after having to snap some catmint off with my teeth. After I dropped it back onto the ground, I asked the tom, "What's yours?"

"Oreo."

"*Oreo?*" I repeated, suppressing a purr of amusement at the incredibly odd name.

Oreo snorted, clearly pretending to be offended as he licked a paw and ran it over his ear. "I think it is a very nice name, thank you very much!" the tom meowed as I purred with amusement.

"It's a great name... I think. I just don't know what it means!" I replied, using my paws to bring all of the catmint into one pile to pick up. "Well, it's nice to meet you, Oreo." I tried to ignore the twinge of guilt that was rising inside of me, just by doing something as little as talking to someone that wasn't a Clan cat.

Well, he's friendly, and I'm being friendly back! I told myself. *I'll probably never see him again, anyway, so I might as well be nice.*

"It's nice to meet you too, Lilypetal!" Oreo meowed. "Yeah, you definitely have a wild cat name. You know, I do know a bit about them."

Heh, that's what they all say, I thought to myself. *They all think that we're these bloodthirsty savages that sharpen their claws on bones.* "Oh,

yeah?" I inquired, picking up the catmint to carry in my mouth.

"I think so. I know that there are four different groups of you, and you all fight if you cross each other's boundaries. And... you hunt for your food and put in on a pile for cats to retrieve," Oreo listed off mindlessly.

Impressive. I raised my eyebrows in intrigue. "Goodness, have you spent a day in the Clans or something?" I purred. *Even I didn't know that much going into the Clans!*

Oreo shrugged as he let his head fall to the grassy floor. "Well, actually, it's quite funny," Oreo continued, "My mother actually claimed that she had been a Clan cat once."

Whoa, what?! I thought in shock. *What if it's a cat that I know, or have at least heard of?*

"Really? Do you remember your mother's name?" I asked Oreo through the catmint still in my mouth. *Please, please, please.*

But to my dismay, after Oreo seemed to grasp at his memories for a few heartbeats, he shrugged. "No, I don't," he admitted. "I was taken to a new home when I was still a pretty small kit, so I don't remember very much."

Foxdung. "Well, do you remember *anything* about her?" I asked, taking a step closer to Oreo.

I stood there, the anticipation continuing to grow inside of me as Oreo thought again. "Hm... I do remember how restless she seemed most of the time," the black and white tom murmured, looking up as if something in the sky was giving him answers. "She was always looking out the window, saying to herself that she was going to get back to the Clans, someday."

My heart began to beat faster as I realized that the possibilities were being narrowed down. "Okay, okay," I whispered, half to myself. "What else?"

"Well... I seem to remember her telling me about the Clan she had apparently lived in, for just a short time after she found her way

there - under the trees, in a big ravine," Oreo went on, clearly trying his hardest to dig deep into his memories.

A cat that lived in the old forest, I concluded, my heart beating even faster as the options were narrowed down even more, actual images of cats popping into my head. *And... and who wasn't actually born as a Clan cat...*

I dropped the catmint that was in my mouth and let it fall back onto the ground. *Oh my StarClan.*

"You know what? I might actually kind of remember what she looked like!" Oreo went on. "Oh, what a pretty cat she was! Gray and white with the softest fluffy fur!"

The more that Oreo talked, the more foggy that his words were becoming. My insides were bubbling up with so many different emotions at once, that I almost seemed to be getting pulled away from the outside world.

But knowing that I further had to confirm my suspicions, I took a deep breath, trying to compose myself as I looked back up at Oreo.

But that certainly didn't help.

My heart practically stopped when I met the tom's gaze, the leaf-bare sun casting against his green eyes in a way that made me realize that... they actually weren't green at all.

Oreo has hazel eyes.

I practically felt numb with emotion as Oreo tried to search my gaze, his own full of concern. "Lilypetal?" he murmured warily. "Are you okay?"

Nope.

I was speechless now, and I certainly wasn't going to be able to respond to Oreo for the moment.

Because now, the pieces were all put together for me.

I knew exactly who Oreo's mother was.

Oh yes, I knew her *very* well.

Great StarClan, how many surprises like this am I going to have in my life? I thought as I simply stared back at Oreo, completely in awe.

Hello, brother.

Chapter 10

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

In the name of all that is holy...

"Lilypetal?" Oreo repeated as I continued to stand speechless. I was barely fazed when he then shook his tail in front of my face. "Earth to Lilypetal!"

"More like Lilypetal's head to earth," I muttered to myself.

"What?"

"Nothing," I meowed more loudly, shaking my head to try and bring myself back into focus.

"What's going on?" Oreo pressed, his eyes round with worry. He then gasped, his stance straightening as if something exciting had crossed his mind. "Do you know who my mother is?"

Unfortunately, I thought as I managed to meet Oreo's hazel gaze, or, my *brother's* hazel gaze, rather.

As outrageous as it was, I knew that it was true - this *Oreo*, despite me never having seen him in my entire life, was my kin.

We shared the same mother.

Mistpelt was Oreo's mother as well as mine.

There weren't many cats out there that shared a story like Mistpelt's, and Oreo had described it perfectly - a cat that wasn't originally born in the Clans, but had found their way to ThunderClan, was taken away to become a kittypet, yet wanted to escape to find her way to the Clans again.

That would have said enough right there, I thought bitterly, *but the fact*

that Oreo also described my mother's appearance perfectly definitely adds to it...

Something else that I was also pretty sure of was that Oreo and I did not share the same father - that's something that wouldn't make sense by the timing. *By the time Mistpelt was taken by Twolegs and had become a kittypet, Scourge was already long dead,* I realized. *Oreo came from another mate. But who?*

"Gosh, are all wild cats this spacey?" Oreo purred, interrupting my thoughts.

I shook my head again, letting out a huff of exasperation and irritation. "Great StarClan, I'm sorry, Oreo," I breathed, trying to flatten my fur that was beginning to bristle. "Um... well..." I trailed off, realizing that I had no idea how to begin. *How do you tell a cat that you've never met that you share the same mother?*

I then watched as Oreo's gaze grew overcome with concern. "You *do* know who my mother is, don't you?" the black and white tom asked more quietly before beginning to shift his paws from side to side nervously. "Who could it be that makes you so uneasy?"

This tom is about to find out that this cat who happened to appear at the top of his fence is related to him. I took a deep breath. *Here we go.*

"Well... *my* mother," I meowed, barely just above a whisper. I then sighed, taking another step closer to Oreo. "You and I are kin."

Something that managed to lighten my mood just a bit, over all of the betrayal and anger I was feeling, was the multiple phases of Oreo's reaction to what I had just said. First, there was utter confusion, as if someone had just told him that mice now walk on their hind legs and speak cat. Then, there was disbelief, his gaze darkening as he seemed to strive to process my words.

Then, lastly, there was complete astonishment, his eyes widening and blazing with excitement. "No way!" my brother exclaimed, beginning to knead his paws into the ground. Oreo then seemed to try to compose himself, sitting down again as he met my gaze. "You're my sister? A *Clan cat* shares blood with me?"

I managed to let out a small purr of amusement at Oreo's enthusiasm. "Affirmative," I breathed, shrugging and shaking my head slowly as I looked back at the kittypet. "Your... *our* mother is Mistpelt, I'm sure of it."

"*Mistpelt!* That was her name!" Oreo exclaimed, his ears flicking. "So, she's *your* mother too? How is that possible?"

I'd grab a snack, buddy. It's a doozy, I joked to myself before answering. "Mistpelt had me with... a cat from the Twolegplace," I explained, a shiver running down my spine. "She took me to ThunderClan - the Clan that I live in now."

Oreo simply nodded with wide eyes as I went on, clearly bracing himself for the elucidation ahead.

"We were only there for a couple of moons before a Twoleg found its way to our camp and took the both of us," I continued, trying to pull from my memories of what I had been told. "Mistpelt and I both became kittypets, completely separate from each other, until we both managed to find our way back to ThunderClan." *But I didn't even realize that I had found my way back home until Mistpelt got there...*

"Wow," Oreo whispered, his gaze burning into mine as they glowed with fascination. "So... was it while Mistpelt was a kittypet that she had me?"

"That's all that I can assume," I answered. "My father was dead by the time that Mistpelt was taken in as a kittypet."

"So we share Mistpelt as a mother, but we have different fathers?"

"Precisely," I meowed, managing to let out a small purr out of the outrageousness of the situation. *And all I came to do here was find catmint. Who knew that I'd also find a sibling, huh?*

"Well... throw me into the lake and call me a fish..." Oreo breathed as he shook his head slowly. He then took a deep breath, letting his gaze meet mine once again. "You're my sister."

"You're my brother," I meowed back, affection rising inside of me

for the first time since the big revelation. It was very short-lived, but it happened.

Up until then, I had only been overwhelmed with disbelief and outrage. Mistpelt had hidden yet another secret from me, and for what?

I had managed eventually to understand Mistpelt's reasons for hiding the identity of my father, Scourge - I mean, she was probably ashamed. There certainly weren't many cats that I knew of that would proudly share that their former mate was a deranged killer who had attempted to take over the ThunderClan forest.

But why had Mistpelt hidden this latest information from me? Why couldn't I know that I had siblings? *Why couldn't I know that I had more kin out there?*

"Lilypetal, are you okay?" Oreo then meowed as he tried to meet my gaze again.

I stared back at Oreo in confusion. "Why?"

My ears pricked as Oreo then purred with amusement. "Because you were growling while you were sinking your claws into the ground," he answered.

Well, it's a pretty justified reaction to your mother lying to you, if you ask me, I thought as I sheathed my claws and fixed my hunched posture. *But I need to calm down. Mistpelt may have hidden this, but it's not Oreo's fault, and I'm not letting my anger out on him.*

But Oreo seemed to read my thoughts. "You didn't even know that I existed until just moments ago, did you?" he whispered apprehensively.

I snorted. "Wow, you really are my kin, aren't you?" I purred, padding up to Oreo and nudging my shoulder with his, trying to lighten the mood. "No, I had no idea!"

"And I had no idea about you, either," Oreo admitted, briefly touching his nose to my ear. "But that's because I can't even remember if Mistpelt *said* anything about me having a sister."

Well, at least there was a chance *that she did*, I thought bitterly, but didn't dare say that remark out loud. *Oh, the talking to that Mistpelt is going to get when I return with the catmint.*

I then gasped, shooting back up to my paws. "Great StarClan, the catmint!" I yowled, my eyes immediately going back to the bundle of plants I had dropped on the ground.

"You needed to bring that back home to some sick cats, didn't you?" Oreo asked worriedly, also standing up.

I nodded back to my brother urgently. "Yes! And I'm sure I've delayed more than enough time already!" I responded, running over to the catmint and picking back up in my jaws. I then met Oreo's gaze again sympathetically. "Obviously, time was delayed for a very important reason, but I can't keep them waiting any longer!"

Oreo dipped his head in understanding as another purr of amusement rumbled in his throat. "Of course, Lilypetal," he meowed, his eyes reflecting the same reluctance that I felt.

I wish that I could stay with him and talk all day! I thought sadly, knowing that this couldn't happen. *I mean... he's my brother, we share blood. I want to know everything about him!*

Just as I was about to give Oreo some parting words, I cut myself off as I noticed that Oreo seemed to want to say something. So, for a few heartbeats, I simply watched as Oreo opened and closed his mouth again and again, clearly hesitating greatly.

By the time he actually spoke, my anticipation was killing me. "You said that Mistpelt lives in ThunderClan with you, right?" Oreo began nervously, his gaze flitting around the area. "Could... could I-"

"-See her?" I finished for Oreo.

Oreo then sniffed, and I let out a *mrrow* of laughter as he repeated my words from earlier. "And you really are *my* kin!" he purred, before his demeanor showed nervousness once again. "Yes... I would like to see my mother, if it is possible."

You see, my friend, I don't know if it is *possible*, I said to Oreo in my

thoughts. I already knew that ThunderClan would not take well to a warrior bringing yet another kittypet into camp. Yes, that was how I had become apart of the place I called home now, but along with me were also Firestar, Cloudtail, Daisy, Millie, Nightwing and Dustystorm. We had all proven ourselves as formidable Clan members in many ways, but I knew that this was still incredibly risky.

But... it's not like Oreo will want to stay, right? Anyways, I can't deprive him of seeing his own mother; that's not fair, I rationalized, my gaze then flitting to the herbs I was holding in my mouth. *And I have to get this catmint back right now. There's no time for any rebuttals here.*

I dipped my head once, coming to a decision. "Okay," I meowed to Oreo before turning around and leaping onto the fence. Once I was steady at the top, I looked back at Oreo and beckoned him with my tail. "Let's go." *And StarClan forbid my kits and I get shredded before I can even deliver the catmint...*

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"Great StarClan, you look just as scared as I was when I arrived in this Clan for the first time!" I teased the Oreo as the two of us stood in front of the camp entrance from the outside. I then gave my brother a supportive nudge. "Don't worry, you won't have to say a word. I'll talk to our leader, and I'm sure he'll let you meet Mistpelt."

Oreo sighed as I began to lead him through the camp entrance. "If he doesn't, I'm certainly not going to try and go against him," he murmured, his voice shaking slightly. "I'd rather return to my housefolk in one piece - hopefully you can understand that."

I exchanged a half-amused, half-nervous glance with my brother as I crawled into view of the camp clearing, then pausing so that he could walk up to flank me. I met his gaze and touched the tip of my tail to his shoulder before guiding him deeper into camp.

What was crazy was that our closeness didn't feel odd at all. It was almost was if we hadn't just met earlier in the day. I mean, the travel back to ThunderClan camp had been quick, but we had

talked almost like we were old friends catching up. We had even found out many things we had in common - we both kneaded our paws when we were excited, we both had been teased for our hazel eyes, and we both liked mouse.

Yes, my kittypet brother had hunted and liked *mouse*. I was a proud big sister.

As I expected, many eyes fell on the two of us as we arrived into camp. Faster than I had ever done anything, I took a moment to run to the medicine den, drop of the catmint, receive thanks from Leafpool and Brightheart, and return to my brother. I pressed closer to Oreo as cats began to hiss and press me with questions, and I brushed against his bristling fur.

"Who in the name of StarClan is that?" I heard Berrynose growl.

"He smells like a kittypet!" Spiderleg yowled in disgust.

"You were going out to get catmint, right?" Dustpelt hissed as we passed him, his eyes narrowing into slits. "I didn't realize that catmint consisted of actual *cat* now."

I flashed a warning glance to the tabby warrior before meeting Firestar's gaze, who was standing under the Highledge with Brambleclaw.

While the other cats could wait for their explanation as to why I had brought a kittypet in camp, I knew that Firestar would need to know right away. The ThunderClan leader's eyes, along with Brambleclaw's were glowing with hostility and wariness as I approached him.

I tried to explain the situation to the leader and deputy as quickly and concisely as possible. The two toms simply nodded as I spoke, glancing back at Oreo every few heartbeats. Their eyes had widened in shock when I revealed that Oreo was Mistpelt's son.

"I only want to see her," Oreo put in, to my surprise, but it didn't take me long to realize that my brother probably couldn't stand this confrontation with a wild cat leader and his deputy for much

longer. "I'll be out of your fur as soon as we talk."

Firestar and Brambleclaw exchanged an anxious glance, but after many heartbeats, Firestar finally nodded. "You may go and see Mistpelt," the ThunderClan leader concluded, dipping his head to Oreo. "But as you said, you must leave as soon as you are done."

I tried to suppress a purr of amusement as Oreo began to knead his paws into the ground in excitement. "Oh, thank you! Thank you so much!" he meowed before beginning to whip his head around the camp. "Where is she?"

"She's-" I cut myself off as I began to point at the warriors den with my tail. I quickly corrected myself, gesturing to the elders den. "She's in there."

Oreo's tail tip was twitching back and forth. "What are we waiting for?" he exclaimed as he trotted in the direction I had pointed. "Let's go, Lilypetal!"

I snorted as I began to follow my brother. "I could wait for a good chunk of time," I muttered, thinking that I was the only one that could hear my words. But, my ears flicked in surprise as I heard an amused grunt behind me, and I turned my head slightly to see Brambleclaw looking back at me. His amber eyes seemed to glow with a mix of amusement and concern.

Did Brambleclaw hear what I said? I wondered. I returned a warm look to the tabby warrior briefly before stomping into the elders den, knowing that I shouldn't keep Oreo waiting.

Just as I was about to follow my brother into the den, a very familiar golden pelt appeared from the dirtplace tunnel. I turned my head to meet Thornclaw's very concerned and slightly hostile gaze, assuming he had noticed the stranger I was following. His eyes seemed to be saying, "It looks like you did a lot more than just find catmint, and I would *love* to know why."

"I'll explain later!" I called back to my mate before continuing to travel across camp.

When I crawled through the den entrance, Oreo was standing as he looked down at something with wide eyes. I padded around him and saw that he was staring down at Mistpelt, who was curled up in her nest, asleep. To our luck, both Purdy and Mousefur were nowhere to be found inside of the den.

For some reason, the sight of my mother filled me with even more enragement than had already been bubbling up inside of me since finding out that Oreo was my brother.

So much so, that I couldn't keep my voice even anymore. "Wake up!" I barked into my mother's ear. I then lifted my head back up, ignoring the shocked gasp from Oreo. "Naptime is over."

As anyone would expect, Mistpelt's eyes shot open with my words. Her head immediately shot up and whipped around the den, stopping once her gaze fell on the two of us.

For many heartbeats, no cat spoke. Oreo and I simply stood as Mistpelt's eyes switched back and forth between the two of us, then finally resting on Oreo. When I didn't think I could feel any more anger, that managed to happen when I saw the gleam of recognition and love in my mother's eyes.

She knows who Oreo is completely! I thought, unsheathing my claws and digging them into the ground. *If her memory of him was faint, this would be more forgivable, but now it's even worse.*

"My son..." Mistpelt breathed, standing up so that she could stand face to face with Oreo. "I never thought that I would see you again."

"And you," Oreo whispered, a purr rumbling in his throat as he touched noses with Mistpelt.

Mistpelt was purring simultaneously as she pulled away, her blue eyes glowing with such love that I thought they would explode, or that she would. "Look at you, all grown up and handsome," she meowed before rubbing her cheek against Oreo's. "Oh, my son."

Out of my anger, I couldn't help but intervene. "Yes, your son," I muttered, trying to suppress the growl rising in my throat. "Care to

explain?"

Mistpelt sighed, now looking full of remorse and regret as she turned to face me. *You had better,* I thought.

Mistpelt hesitated, so I decided to help her a bit. "I know that you had him as a kittypet, and that we don't share a father," I meowed begrudingly. "Also, I know that you failed to tell me!"

"Lilypetal..." Mistpelt began hesitantly. "I am so sorry, I really am."

I simply grunted and flashed Oreo an apologetic look before Mistpelt continued, nodding to her son. "Yes, I had you while I was a kittypet - before I escaped to find ThunderClan," she meowed evenly. "Your father is a kittypet named Wendell - a long-furred brown tabby with blue eyes. He was the most wonderful tom that I ever could have fallen in love with, but I knew that I was going to leave him once I managed to find a way out of that Twoleg nest."

She then let out a sigh and closed her eyes. "Even more so once some idiot Twolegs stole Oreo away from us and took him to a new home," she then nearly whispered. She then opened her eyes again, her pale blue gaze glittering as she looked at my brother. "I thought I'd lost him for good."

"I see," I muttered, having just been staring back at Mistpelt as she explained, my bitterness and anger still far from disappearing. "But what in StarClan's name made you decide that you weren't going to tell me all of this?"

Mistpelt's answer didn't make me feel any better, but I was bracing myself for that already. "As horrible as it is, I... I hated thinking about the heartbreaks of my past," she told me with a weak shrug. "I simply didn't think it was worth sharing with you... not when you couldn't ever meet him."

"Telling me that I have a brother isn't worth sharing?" I growled as I began to pace around the den, trying to release my pent-up energy in whatever way I could. "You really love to pick and choose what you tell me, don't you? Is it fun or something? Huh? I bet I can guess what you were thinking on the way to camp after Thornclaw

and I found you - 'Hm... which of Lilypetal's family members am I going to keep from her?' Her father... her brother, her four sisters, maybe?"

I knew that Mistpelt was going to want to cut in, but I didn't let her. "This tom-" I continued, lashing my tail towards Oreo. "-is a cat that I share blood with, and I had no idea until just moments ago, thanks to you! He has hazel eyes, and you didn't even bother to mention him when we were talking about that darned eye color, thinking about whether one of my kits might have them - we'll talk about my kits later, for goodness sake!" I added the last part to Oreo, whose eyes had widened when I mentioned my kits.

I didn't even realize that cats out in the camp might be able to hear me from how loudly I was speaking through my rage. "It took me a while to get over the fact that my father was Scourge, and that you didn't bother to tell me that, but what about *this?* Even just a brief mention would have been lovely! But was that effort put in? No! Who'd want to tell their daughter about their sibling named Oreo? And by the way," I exclaimed before finally pausing and turning to face Mistpelt again. "What in the name of StarClan is an Oreo, anyway?"

"Lilypetal, please calm down," Mistpelt breathed, looking physically exhausted by the full-on rant I had just thrown at her. "You can't put so much strain on yourself while you're expecting your kits."

I took a deep breath and sat down, having to admit to myself that Mistpelt was right. "Hm, and this strain was *whose* fault?" I couldn't help but hiss back. *I'm so sorry, kits. I'm going to try and stay calm, I promise.*

"I'm sorry," Mistpelt repeated desperately, "But we can discuss this further later."

Personally I think confronting you as soon as possible was the best choice, but whatever catches your prey, I thought to myself rather than out loud.

"Isn't this incredible?" Mistpelt continued, padding over to sit next to me, beckoning Oreo over so that he could do the same.

My brother settled on my other side, and I was surprised when I felt a tail wrap itself around my shoulders. I met Oreo's gaze to see nothing but sympathy there. A purr managed to rumble in my throat as I briefly rubbed my head against my brother's shoulder. *I can already tell that he's going to be an amazing brother,* I thought fondly. *I've never known what it's like to have a sibling, but I can already tell that it's pretty awesome.*

"We're all together," Mistpelt breathed, looking back at the two of us as her blue eyes glowed with intense love. "We're family."

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I felt so incredibly exhausted as I crawled out from the elders den. Not physically, oh, no! To my luck, the kits hadn't been much of a burden - the best kind of burden, of course - all day. No, it was my brain that felt as if it had swam across the lake and back.

Needing some time to think, I had left Mistpelt and Oreo in the elders den to talk and catch up by themselves, and once they were done, I would escort Oreo back home. *And I clearly wasn't helping with the sentimentality of things...*

Almost as soon as I padded out into the camp clearing, I stopped in my tracks as I noticed that Brambleclaw was approaching me. His kind gaze was definitely a sight for sore eyes at the moment.

I nodded to the ThunderClan deputy in greeting as I padded up to meet him, curious to see what he wanted.

Out of the corner my eye, I could see that Thornclaw was over by the fresh-kill pile with Dustpelt, and I assumed that the senior warrior was spilling everything that he knew to my mate. I wanted to storm over there as soon as possible and explain my side, but knew that I should see what Brambleclaw had to say, first.

"Hi, Brambleclaw!" I meowed, forcing out a more cheerful voice despite all that I was feeling.

"Hey, Lilypetal," Brambleclaw meowed back, settling down beside me as his amber eyes now glowed with concern. "How are you?"

I certainly wasn't going to lie to the tabby tom, so I let out a sigh and shrugged. "I've been much better, I have to admit," I murmured, looking down at the ground.

"You definitely didn't seem too excited when you followed Oreo to the elders den," Brambleclaw murmured, a bit of laughter in his voice.

"Ah, so you did hear what I said," I purred back before letting out a huff. "I just can't believe that she hid this from me... How would it have hurt Mistpelt to mention that I have a brother? I could have known that he was out there so much earlier..."

"I completely understand," Brambleclaw meowed softly, touching the tip of his tail to my shoulder. "And when I say that... I really mean it - *I understand*."

"You do?" I mewed, surprised as I met the deputy's gaze, before realizing the meaning of his words. "Oh... yeah, you do." *You really, really do!*

"Finding out that Lionblaze, Hollyleaf and Jayfeather weren't my kits was definitely one of the toughest things that I've had to endure," Brambleclaw explained, "And the fact that Squirrelflight had chosen to keep it from me was even worse."

I nodded, suddenly feeling an overwhelming amount of sympathy for the brown tabby. *Sometimes I wonder if I should have convinced Squirrelflight to tell you once I found out...*

"Of course, thanks to you, Squirrelflight and I were able to work on making things better again," Brambleclaw continued, "but things weren't back to the way they were immediately. It took time for me to truly forgive her. I mean, she lied to me for so long."

"Definitely, and I can completely understand that. But... now you two seem happier than ever," I observed, putting in what I had actually seen of the two of them lately.

"Yes, we are," Brambleclaw answered, nodding his head and briefly glancing over to his mate, who was talking to Leafpool by the

warriors den. After a few heartbeats, his gaze returned to me. "But it took some time. I think that is what you need as well."

I snorted. "You've got that right."

Brambleclaw then stood up, flicking my ear with his tail. "You have every right to be upset," the ThunderClan deputy meowed, "But everything will slowly start becoming clearer. Maybe Mistpelt does have an explanation that you... well, haven't quite let her *explain* yet."

Good point, I couldn't help but admit to myself. *Really good point.* "Thank you, Brambleclaw," I purred, nudging him lightly on the shoulder. "This is exactly what I needed to hear."

"Sure," Brambleclaw meowed, dipping his head before joining Firestar under the Highledge once again.

I watched him go before standing up and walking over to the other side of camp, finally able to talk to Thornclaw.

Yes, time is what I need, I thought as I padded along. *I need to take the time to understand Mistpelt's reasons... if she has one. I really want to be able to understand and forgive her, but will I even be able to forgive her at all? If so, when will it happen?*

Chapter 11

[image]

Swiftpaw's POV

"That's it!" Ashfur praised to me as I slashed at Ashfur's underbelly. "Now, what are you going to do once I do *this?*" The gray Dark Forest warrior then twisted around out of my reach.

Rather than emerging on the other side, back out the way you came.

Ashfur's words echoed in my head as I quickly rolled onto my belly and slid between my mentor's forelegs, then hooking my claws into his fur and dragging him to the ground.

I watched, welling up with triumph as Ashfur stood up and shook out his fur. "How was that?" I couldn't help but ask, not being able to sense approval *or* disappointment from the warrior.

"Not bad," Ashfur muttered, brushing a holly leaf off of his shoulder with his tail.

Hm, I suppose I'll take it, I thought as I lifted a hind leg to scratch at my ear, which at this point had grown sore from the amount of times Ashfur batted at it during the day. "What was that move called? The underbelly slash?" I asked Ashfur as I lowered my paw and stood up. "I'll have to show that to Snowpaw. It's a neat move."

I tried to keep myself from backing away when Ashfur's blue eyes suddenly flashed with anger. "No!" he barked at me.

"*No?*" I repeated back to my mentor, but bit my tongue before I could let anything that could possibly upset my Dark Forest mentor come out. "Why not?"

Ashfur snorted in contempt, as if he expected me to know the answer already. "What do you mean, why *not?*" the gray tom hissed. "You must never reveal these techniques to other cats!"

"Not even to a Clanmate?" I questioned, trying to keep my voice even so that there wasn't the *slightest* chance that Ashfur would think that I was being interrogational.

"*Especially* not to a Clanmate!" Ashfur insisted, unsheathing his claws and digging them into the ground. "Anyway, you should let Snowpaw stick to being the weak apprentice that she is."

Excuse me?!

Suddenly, all of the impatience and anger that I had been pushing down threatened to well up inside of me as Ashfur had insulted my friend. "Hey!" I meowed, a hint of growl in my voice. "Snowpaw is a fantastic apprentice! She's not that far behind me!"

To my luck, Ashfur didn't seemed too phased by my anger, or at least I thought by the way he snorted and lashed his tail. "Well, if that's the case, then I'm concerned," he muttered, and a shiver ran down my spine as I thought that I caught a slight glint of malevolence in his eyes.

Take it back, take it back! I began shifting my paws back and forth nervously. "Well... I didn't mean that," I murmured steadily. "She's a good apprentice, that's all."

I then had to suppress my sigh of relief as Ashfur let out a half-humored, half-disbelieving grunt as he began to pace the clearing. "Whatever. It shouldn't matter, anyway," he meowed, keeping his gaze on me as he padded about. "You're not Snowpaw - which means that she won't be learning *any* of these moves that I'm showing you. All that matters if that you get ahead and become the best, strongest warrior you can be. Clear?"

Great StarClan, am I a kit being lectured in the nursery? "Clear," I meowed back.

"Good," Ashfur mewed in the horrible, ominous voice that came out of his mouth whenever I agreed with him. *Which now, unfortunately, is always...* Sure, some things that my Dark Forest mentor would say, I agreed with genuinely. I *was* benefitting from learning these moves and not showing them to anyone else, I *was* getting ahead,

and I *wanted* to be the best, strongest warrior that I could be.

Which is lucky for me, I thought. *If I didn't want the help, who knows if I'd even be training here? I maybe would... as a ghost!*

"Okay, Swiftpaw," Ashfur then meowed as he sat down in front of me. "Now we're going to-"

"Wake up!"

I let out a hiss of annoyance as I almost immediately realized that I had been yanked from my Dark Forest training, and I was now lying in my nest in the apprentice den. *Foxdung!*

"Swiftpaw!" a she-cat's voice hissed, that was followed by a paw prodding my back. "I know that you're not *dead*, so get up!"

"I am, for StarClan's sake!" I growled as I whipped my head to look up. "Keep your fur on, and give me a moment!" *Whatever cat pulled me away from the Dark Forest, probably resulting in Ashfur growing extremely angry, is coming down with me!* I then let out a gasp and felt my heart begin to beat faster as I met the familiar dark blue eyes of my former denmate.

Well... I take that back.

"Ivypool!" I breathed, my anger vanishing as I leaped up in my nest so that I could stand eye to eye with the sliver and white she-cat. "What's going on? Did Dustystorm send you?"

"No," Ivypool muttered, her gaze burning into mine with the same intensity that it had that night in the Dark Forest. The look was not very readable, but it still made my heart skip a beat. *How I will be able to listen to a word she says while she looks at me like that, I do not know.*

"I need to talk to you," the warrior then hissed before whipping around and leaving the apprentices den.

I couldn't suppress a small gasp as I immediately followed Ivypool out into the early-morning clearing, that was nearly empty except for the dawn patrol reporting to Firestar near the Highledge. *Ivypool*

wants to talk to me? Alone? I thought excitedly. *What could it possibly be about? It sounded urgent...* Even though it was pretty clear to me that what Ivypool wanted to talk to me about was probably more than just having a friendly chat...

But I can't help but hope that she just wants to spend time with me... I thought before hissing and shaking my head quickly. *Stop it, you mouse-brain! Mooning over Ivypool isn't going to get me anywhere! At least... that's what Ashfur would tell me.*

I nearly broke into a run as I saw Ivypool's silver tail disappear through the camp entrance. Just as she had looked back to see that I was behind her, I caught up to her, padding up to walk side by side with her.

As we then began to travel through the forest, I hoped that Ivypool wasn't noticing the countless times that I was opening and closing my mouth without even one word coming out. *What do I even say to her? Is she in the mood for a lighthearted conversation or will she shred my ear off?* I then let out a quiet snort as I briefly licked my paw and ran it over my ear. *Someone's already taking care of that.*

Luckily, just a few heartbeats later, Ivypool stopped and settled down near one of ThunderClan's training hollows. She lashed her tail in front of her, signaling for me to sit. I gave the she-cat a nod before doing as she had told me. I forced myself to look into her eyes as she looked back at me with the same intense gaze.

As much as I hated to admit it, the look was intimidating more than it could ever flatter me. "So..." I meowed, swishing my tail back and forth on the ground anxiously, sending some snow up in the air. "What did you need to talk about?"

I loosened as I then watched Ivypool sigh, her gaze softening as she lightly batted at some snow with her paw. "Okay, here's the thing," she began. "You know that I train in the Dark Forest, and *I* know that *you* do."

As Ivypool began to speak, I found myself almost instantly having to push down anger. *Ivypool pulled me away from the Dark Forest to talk about the Dark Forest?* I then took a deep breath, attempting to

answer the she-cat evenly. "Yes. I've seen you whenever I'm taken to do group training," I meowed, giving Ivypool a curt nod. "What of it?"

I raised my eyebrows as Ivypool then began to shift her paws from side to side nervously. "Well... there's something that you don't know..." she murmured. "I don't just train there for the benefits anymore. I'm a spy."

My ears pricked with surprise at the she-cat's words. "A *spy?*" I exclaimed, feeling the fur along my back beginning to bristle. "A spy for who?"

"For the Clans, essentially," Ivypool answered, "but I report what I see to Lionblaze and Jayfeather."

How in the name of StarClan is she able to do that? My mouth dropped in complete disbelief. "*What?*" I nearly yelled as I stood up. "How are you not caught? How does no cat there know what you're doing?"

Ivypool shrugged. "Because I still *train*, and do whatever they tell me," the silver she-cat replied, "but simultaneously, I try and take in whatever incriminating information I can get."

"That's... that's..." *One of the bravest things I've ever heard...* "Insane!"

"Why are you so shocked?" Ivypool demanded. "What, do you actually think that the Dark Forest has good intentions with their training, like everyone else does?"

Oh, I definitely don't. "Of course not!" I insisted. "But-" *But I can't tell you why...* I then shook my head quickly, deciding that I needed to change the subject somehow. "Why are you telling *me* all of this?"

I tried not to shift as Ivypool took a step closer to me, her scent flooding through my nose. *Her really nice scent... stop it!*

"Because I think that you can help me," Ivypool answered sharply. "Listen, Swiftpaw, I've seen you in the Dark Forest - your demeanor and the look in your eyes. You appear calm, brave and ready to take anything on, but you are scared. I know you are."

I hissed and finally took a step back. "*Scared?*" I repeated back to Ivypool, my hackles beginning to raise. "Why would I be scared?" Well, I was scared, but the fact that another cat could notice it was one of the worst things I could hear - one, because it was Ivypool, and two, what if that meant that Ashfur could sense my fear as well?

Ivypool didn't seem phased by my sudden defensiveness. "I don't know," Ivypool admitted. "I don't know what has brought you to the Dark Forest in the first place. But that doesn't matter right now." Ivypool then took a deep breath, and I let my fur relax as I waited for her to go on.

"You clearly don't trust these Dark Forest cats... as you shouldn't," Ivypool continued. "I mean, you watched Ashfur nearly shred Thornclaw, your kin, to bits. You take part in training, but your eye is on one of the spirits most of the time. Even when you're awake, you seem so tense..."

The amount of times that I have been told that in the past quarter moon... "Your point?" I simply muttered, trying to hide my shame - because everything that Ivypool had said was true. I had watched Ashfur nearly kill Thornclaw, I always tried to take glances at the other Dark Forest cats whenever I could in the fear of what they would do, *and Ashfur's been driving me crazy during the day!*

"Swiftpaw, I'm asking you to be a spy with me," Ivypool meowed, her blue gaze burning into mine. "I've already talked to Lionblaze about it. He thinks that it might be a good idea."

It was then that I experienced the biggest double whammy of my entire life.

"*What?!*" I exclaimed, my fur beginning to bristle all over again. "You've talked to Lionblaze about me being a spy, about me being in the Dark Forest?" I didn't care how much I admired Ivypool in that moment because of how angry I was. How could she be so mouse-brained as to out me to another cat?

"Lionblaze is the only one that knows! Keep your fur on!" Ivypool reassured me, nudging my on the shoulder with her tail tip. "I only

told him because I thought that you would help me." I then couldn't help but feel a pang of sympathy as Ivypool's gaze burned into mine, filled with helplessness. "Which, you are going to, right?"

For a moment, I almost did open my mouth to say that I would be more than willing to help - to work side by side with Ivypool in the Dark Forest, to dig deeper into whatever plans they had, together.

But I couldn't. There was no way.

The fact that Ivypool had been able to pull off being a spy up until now without being caught was absolutely baffling to me, and maybe it could be done, but there was no way in the name of StarClan that I could risk it. Not with Ashfur's threats, and him breathing down my neck constantly.

I let out a sigh full of a mix of frustration and solemnness. *If he were to find out that I was spying on the Dark Forest for the Clans' benefit, there is no way that I'd see another day.*

"No, Ivypool," I meowed calmly, taking a step back from the she-cat. "I'm sorry. I can't."

I then had to surpress a gasp as Ivypool's eyes flashed with anger, and her fur began to bristle. "*No?*" she repeated, her voice taut. "Why not?"

I hesitated for several heartbeats, growing even more speechless as I stared back into Ivypool's blaring gaze. "I-I..." I stammered, before letting out a huff and letting my head fall to the ground. "I... I just can't." As lame of an excuse as that was, it was all that I could manage.

"That's all?" Ivypool growled back, beginning to walk in tight circles around me. "You *can't?* What happened to you saying that you don't think the Dark Forest has good intentions? Are you really *that* scared of them? Are you actually training to fight with them?"

Fight with *them?* I repeated in my mind, suddenly utterly confused. *What in the name of StarClan does Ivypool mean by that?*

I didn't get time to ask. "I've never thought of you as a coward,

Swiftpaw," Ivypool continued, "But now-"

"*Coward?*" I hissed back, my confusion suddenly being replaced with infuriation. "If anyone is a coward, it's *you* - begging other cats for help, exposing them to your Clanmates!"

Ivypool then let out an enraged hiss, and I kept my place as she stepped forward, so close that we were practically nose-to-nose. "You have *got* to be joking!" she growled, and after a few heartbeats, she let out another hiss and whipped herself around. "Maybe it's a good thing that some other cat knows and is keeping an eye on you, because you're clearly not putting your Clan's needs first!"

What?! That is not true! "Ivypool-" I began.

"Save it!" the she-cat hissed as she began to pad away. "Get out of my sight!"

At those words, I couldn't help but feel a slight pang of regret and longing, but I tried my hardest to ignore it. "Fine!" I spat back, turning away from the silver-and-white warrior and stomping away as well. "And don't ask me about the Dark Forest again!"

"Oh, don't worry, I won't!" Ivypool called back mockingly. "I'd *love* to spare you from having to come face to face with your own cowardice!"

I simply let out another hiss before pelting off into the forest, rage bubbling up inside of me like it never had before as Ivypool's words echoed in my head. *Maybe it's a good thing that some other cat knows and is keeping an eye on you, because you're clearly not putting your Clan's needs first!*

I let out a low growl as I finally slowed down, eventually coming to a stop and slashing at the snow with my claws. *That is not true at all,* I tried to convince myself. *Ashfur may have a decent amount of control over me, but I'm still fulfilling my duties as a Clan cat, aren't I? Ivypool has no idea what she is talking about.*

But, as bitter and angry as I was with the she-cat, my deep veneration and feelings for her were far from gone. *She is so brave to*

be spying on the Dark Forest like that... there's so much that she's risking, I realized to myself. *But... what did she mean when she accused me of fighting with the Dark Forest cats?*

I sighed as I stood up, deciding to take a stroll through the snow-filled forest to clear my head to some extent. *Clearly, there's still a lot of things about the Dark Forest and Ashfur that I don't know...* I thought nervously. *As true as* that *is... I'm not backing down on my decision - there's no way that I could ever spy for them, and I'm not going to.*

Chapter 12

[image]

Goldenshine's POV

The camp was eerily silent as I made my way into the warriors den for the night; many cats were already asleep, and the last border patrol for the day was to return at any moment. Not even one creature or bug seemed to be stirring out in the forest.

I had just returned from a brief hunting trip with Hollyleaf and Nightwing, and when I say brief, I mean *brief* - as per usual in leaf-bare, prey was scarce. Along with that, the three of us were tired enough to sleep on our paws, so we unfortunately had had to give up as quickly as we had started.

I'm going to go out and try again first thing tomorrow, I decided as I settled down in an empty nest. I then let out a quiet, satisfied grunt as I thought about how nice was it to be able to commit to things without having to worry about tending to a little one first, as I had had to do when I was caring for Swiftpaw just a few quarter moons ago.

I still stand by my decision to not have more kits, that's for sure! I thought as I briefly looked back on my conversation with Dustystorm once again. *Yes, kits bring new life and new warriors, but I'm bringing life to the Clans through my help in hunting and patrolling!*

Just as I was closing my eyes, I noticed movement from the den entrance through my two slits. I lifted my head, peering over a few sleeping bodies to see Dustystorm making his way in. I tried to suppress a purr of amusement as my mate scanned the den, clearly struggling to see through the darkness.

"Psst!" I whispered to Dustystorm, waving my tail in the air. "Looking for me?"

Dustystorm's head had shot in my direction as I spoke, his eyes

lighting up once they fell on me. "There you are!" the sandy-gray tom whispered back, licking my head before lying down beside me. "Great StarClan, leaf-bare doesn't only bring the coldest weather, but the darkest nights!"

I let out a quiet purr of amusement. "That's for sure!" I meowed softly as I snuggled into Dustystorm and leaned my head on his shoulder. *Now, speaking of darkness...* "So, how was training with Swiftpaw today?"

Dustystorm snorted. "Great StarClan, you sure think highly of your son, don't you?" my mate teased, sounding sarcastic.

I narrowed my eyes at Dustystorm's comment. "What do you mean?" I questioned as I began to fill up with confusion.

I watched as Dustystorm hesitated for a few heartbeats, and then proceeded to shrug. "I don't know... the Goldenshine I know doesn't typically sound *condescending* when she speaks," he purred, touching his nose to my ear.

Condescending? Did I sound condescending? I wondered as Dustystorm's words sunk in. Almost instantly after, I found myself trying to push down guilt. *Has it really come to that? Is my relationship with Swiftpaw so strained that I now sound condescending whenever I talk about him without even thinking about it?*

"I... I wasn't trying to..." I murmured, then trailing off.

"Hey, it's alright," Dustystorm insisted, and I felt him brush his muzzle against my cheek as I stared ahead. "Forget that I said that."

Oh, trust me, I'm going to try, I tried to convince myself, barely being able to handle the regret I was feeling. *Great StarClan, do I miss my son...*

"It's alright, love," I then whispered, touching my muzzle to Dustystorm's briefly. "Anyways... Swiftpaw's training today?" I inflected my voice in a way that made me sound cheerful in the hopes that Dustystorm would return it, because despite Swiftpaw's behavior lately, I couldn't help but feel the slightest twinge of

optimism when it came to hearing Dustystorm's report.

I mean, maybe Dustystorm would truly have a good influence on my closed-off son as I had hoped... and maybe things would begin to change. That was at least what I had been *trying* to tell myself since Dustystorm had taken over as Swiftpaw's mentor in Foxleap's absence.

But unfortunately, all of my hopes and dreams flew away as soon as I saw the look on Dustystorm's face go from bright and affectionate to quite... *uncertain* and worried. *Oh, no...*

"Well..." Dustystorm breathed, his gaze full of wariness. I could tell that looking into my eyes was difficult for him, but he managed to do it, anyway. "Do you want me to be honest?"

It's never good when a cat asks that, I thought fearfully. I narrowed my eyes once again as I stared back at my mate. "You love me, right?"

"Of course I do, Goldenshine."

"Then yes, you're going to be honest with me."

Dustystorm's whole demeanor radiated reluctance, and it took him a few heartbeats to speak again. "Listen, don't me wrong, Swiftpaw is an incredibly skilled apprentice," Dustystorm finally murmured, his blue gaze burning into mine. "I mean, sometimes I wonder if *he* should be training *me*..."

Okay... I then felt my heart sink as my mate's gaze darkened. "But... Great *StarClan*, is he hostile!" he went on. "It's as if that son of yours can't even have the bare minimum of fun!"

Dustystorm then let out a small snort, his gaze warming slightly. "Which is really confusing, considering his mother is the most fun cat I know..." he purred, licking my cheek before pulling away with a frustrated sigh. "I know I've only been training him for a day, but I have to admit, I worry about him a bit."

I bit my tongue, trying my absolute hardest not to give Dustystorm a spitting retort back for speaking so lowly of Swiftpaw. But it was

soon that I realized that I wasn't upset by Dustystorm's negativity, I was upset at the fact that he was right. *I* was worried about him too. *Extremely.*

Yet, I tried to rationalize with the dusty-gray tom. "Well... cats can be hostile though, right?" I whispered, my voice shaking slightly. I felt my tail twitching anxiously behind me. "I mean, look at Berrynose or Spiderleg."

"Sure," Dustystorm muttered, his eyes narrowing into blue slits. "But not like Swiftpaw."

I then fell speechless, simply anticipating Dustystorm's elaboration on that incredibly ominous statement.

"You're right, any cat can be hostile," my mate began to explain, "But there's such a *darkness* to him; something in his eyes and his stance, the way he acts..." Dustystorm then trailed off and shook his head quickly before returning his gaze to me, looking almost as if he was confused by his own words. "I-I don't know, if I'm being honest."

And I only referred to Swiftpaw as darkness as a joke. "I don't know in the slightest bit, either," I breathed, that being all that I could think to say in response as I let my head fall down into our nest. *What in the name of StarClan is happening to my son?*

I could feel Dustystorm's eyes on me from where I lied down in the moss, and after just a heartbeat, I felt a tongue begin to lap at the top of my head.

"Hey, don't you worry," Dustystorm whispered, then pulling away to lower his head beside mine. "Honestly, I'm probably just overanalyzing it, being a new mentor, you know?"

If only that was the case, I thought sadly as I twinned my tail around Dustystorm's. "Hm, you would overanalyze," I whispered back teasingly, trying to lighten the mood and mask my extreme dismay.

Dustystorm rolled his eyes at my comment. "You're right, I'm sure. Maybe Swiftpaw is just another Spiderleg or Berrynose."

Dustystorm and I both then flinched when suddenly a small groan came from a nest just a couple of tail-lengths away.

"Huh... who said my name?" a tom's voice murmured groggily.

I peered over Dustystorm to see that Berrynose was stirring in his nest. For a moment, my heart stopped as I realized that the cream tom might have heard our comments about him. So, I couldn't suppress a sigh of relief when I saw that his eyes were still closed.

Thank StarClan! I thought. *I can't even imagine the talking to that we would get if Berrynose heard us gossiping about him!*

For a few heartbeats, Dustystorm and I watched in silence as Berrynose huffed before falling still in his nest again. We then exchanged an amused glance and shared a small *mrrow* of laughter.

Dustystorm then bent his head forward to touch his nose to mine. "Goodnight, Goldenshine," my mate whispered to me.

I closed my eyes, taking in the tom's scent as I whispered back, "Goodnight, Dustystorm."

Then, after exchanging one last loving look, the two of us almost synchronously bent our heads back down and closed our eyes.

Now that my eyes were closed, I was stuck with nothing but my own thoughts. I was ruthlessly trying to push down my worries of the conversation I had just had with Dustystorm. But unfortunately, my mate's words were still spiraling over and over in my head.

There's such a darkness to him; something in his eyes and his stance, the way he acts...

And they still were, as my exhaustion finally set in, and I was pulled into my slumber.

I was almost hoping that my eyes would immediately open up again, and I would find myself staring straight into the sun beams that cast themselves into the warriors den every morning.

And, well, that *happened*, but I wasn't in the warriors den anymore.

I was bewildered to see that I had woken up in the *nursery*, well past sunhigh, I was sure.

I narrowed my eyes and began to scan my surroundings. The nursery was completely empty, but I could hear the meows of many cats outside. As real as it all seemed, the slight haziness of my vision indicated something else. *I am definitely dreaming.*

"Mother!"

I nearly flinched as a high-pitched voice squeaked nearby. *Who was that?*

"Mother!" the same voice mewed.

I then gasped as suddenly I felt two tiny paws lightly press into my back, and I whipped my head around to see a very familiar gray-black pelt digging itself into my golden fur.

Swiftpaw... but he was much smaller here, just a kit again - surely no older than a few quarter moons.

Oh, my little Swiftkit...

"What are you doing lying around?" my little son exclaimed, beginning to run in tight circles around me. "Play with me!"

For a few moments, I could only stare back at Swiftkit, my mouth open. *This is in the past,* I realized, my heart melting as I got lost in my son's warm gaze. *Swiftpaw may have always had his short temper, but Great StarClan, in the nursery he still made me as happy as even the most joyful kit would...*

"What are you staring at?" Swiftkit asked, tilting his head as he twitched his ears. I then couldn't suppress a yelp as my son then leaped into my flank with a purr. "Come on! Let's play!"

Let's play...

"I want to play with you, Goldenshine!" Swiftkit further begged as he then began to hop up and down, looking up at me.

I want to play with you, Goldenshine... I repeated to myself, my heart suddenly almost feeling physically pained by the amount of longing that I felt. *I took this all for granted, didn't I? Now Swiftpaw wants nothing to do with me.*

But for now, I was going to take advantage of this moment that he did. *It's in the past, but... it will mend my present heart just a bit.*

I gave Swiftkit a sharp nod as I stood up. "Well, what are you standing there and staring at me for?" I purred, snatching a pawful of moss from the nest below and tossing it across the den. "Let's play, Swiftkit!"

Swiftkit flashed me an ecstatic blue gaze before dashing after the mossball. I purred with laughter as I watched my son dive for it, then curling up and restraining it with all four of his legs.

"There you go!" I purred, my heart feeling so full that I was almost sure that it would explode. *I miss this more than words can say.*

I let out a satisfied huff, and just as I was about to retrieve the mossball from Swiftkit to toss it again, I paused as I noticed movement come from the entrance of the nursery.

I shifted my gaze, then gasping as I saw the familiar pelt of Snowpaw - or Snowkit here, I assumed. I almost instantly cut off the greeting I was going to give as I noticed that Snowkit didn't seem to be acknowledging anything around her - the bright sun that nearly fell right on her face, or the fact that I was staring right at her with wide eyes.

The only thing she was focusing on was Swiftkit, who was now lying on his back at the other end of the nursery, batting at the mossball with his paws.

But, it was only heartbeats later that Swiftkit seemed to notice that Snowkit was watching him. He took one glance at her, then letting the mossball fall to his side as he did a double take.

I simply watched as my son slowly got to his paws, his gaze not leaving Snowkit's.

I then followed Swiftkit's gaze, and my heart nearly stopped as I was able to read Snowkit's expression. *That same bone-chilling look that she was giving him from across camp after that Clan meeting!*

Just as this thought occurred to me, I let out a startled yelp as the dream suddenly flashed.

I quickly flitted my gaze around to get an idea of where I was. I was now in almost complete darkness, in a small clearing.

Swiftpaw and Snowpaw were in their same places, but they had had the two quickest growth-spirts I had ever witnessed. Swiftpaw was definitely bigger than me, and Snowpaw was about my size.

They were also still staring at each other, but now, Swiftpaw wasn't confused, and the look that Snowpaw was giving Swiftpaw now made the last one seem warm.

The white she-cat's eyes were blazing with outrage, and Swiftpaw's reflected the same, but there was so much more depth there - so many emotions smashed into two eyeballs. I managed to detect something else out of my son. *That's conflict like I've never seen it before,* I thought, completely sure of myself. *But why is he conflicted?*

The two clearly did not know I was there as they continued to look at each other with their blazing blue eyes and bristled fur.

What is this? I thought as I began to grow very uneasy. *Why are they looking at each other like that? Why are they both so angry?*

I then moved my glance over to Snowpaw from where I had been looking at my son.

Snowflight, I know you're in there, I said to my sister in my thoughts. *What do you see? What do you know about my son?*

Then, the dream flashed again, and I was shocked to see that Swiftpaw had disappeared, but Snowpaw and I were in our same spots. I narrowed my eyes, trying to pinpoint if there were any other differences in our surroundings.

Once I had figured out that there definitely, *definitely* was, I barely

had any time to react as a flash of gray suddenly leaped at Snowpaw.

Wait a moment... is that? It couldn't be... I wondered to myself as my heart began to beat at triple the speed. *A gray cat leaping on Snowpaw... is this a foretelling of the future, or a flashback?*

I barely had time to figure this out as Snowpaw then let out a shriek that sent a chill down my spine. *Whatever it is, I'm going to save Snowpaw!*

I began to pelt towards the two fighting cats without any hesitation. "Get off of her!" I roared, leaping into the air with claws out.

But my jump never landed.

All of the sudden, my eyes shot open again.

This time, I was back in the warriors den with moonhigh still only just passing. I was in my nest curled up with Dustystorm right next to me. The tom was fast asleep now, but I dug myself deeper into his fur to keep myself from shaking.

To say the least, I was incredibly disturbed by all I had just seen - the way that Swiftpaw and Snowpaw looked at each other, clearly in some sort of confrontation, Swiftpaw's apparent conflict, a... *certain cat* attacking Snowpaw with the intent of killing...

Was it all just a crazy dream that my unconscious mind had formed? Or was I receiving something prophetic just as I had feared would happen while Jayfeather was gone?

I took a deep breath, slightly succeeding in trying to get myself to stop trembling. *Great StarClan, Jayfeather,* I said to the medicine cat in my mind, who was surely at the mountains by now. *I cannot wait for you to return so that you can explain this to me... if there's anything to explain.*

Chapter 13

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

Another cold shiver ran down my spine as Thornclaw retracted his tail from my back after helping me step over a fairly tall log.

"Lilypetal," Thornclaw meowed once he was sure I was steady on the other side, "As much as I want to walk with you, and help you in the process, are you sure that you feel up to this?"

I simply gave my mate a half-amused, half-questioning look.

After a few heartbeats, I purred with amusement as Thornclaw rolled his eyes. "Alright, alright," Thornclaw sighed, nuzzling my cheek affectionately with his muzzle. "We'll keep going, if that's what you want."

I then had to suppress another purr as the golden tabby tom seemed to feign a stern, hardened look. "But the moment that you show any signs of exhaustion, I will use any means of persuasion needed to get you back to camp."

I pressed closer to the golden tabby tom as we padded on. "I'm so scared," I meowed with laughter in my voice, licking Thornclaw's cheek. "Thank you."

"I probably wouldn't have even taken you out on this walk if it wasn't for the purpose of you needing to clear your head," my mate muttered as he watched me step over a root.

"Oh, of course," I teased as I looked back at Thornclaw. "Because she-cats expecting kits must be locked up forever, and never to see the light of day again!"

After Thornclaw snorted and rolled his eyes once again, he padded up to meet me again, his gaze softening. "Oh, come on," he meowed

softly as he wound his tail around mine. "You know that I'm just immensely worried about you. I don't want you to push yourself beyond your limits."

"And I appreciate that so much," I reassured Thornclaw. "But don't worry, I won't!" I then let out a sigh as Thornclaw and I began to pad ahead side by side once again. "I just knew that a peaceful walk out in the forest with you was what I needed right now." *More than I could ever explain to you!*

Just a bit earlier in the day, just a bit past dawn, I had been wide awake in the warriors den, tossing and turning.

It hadn't been that way just this morning though... more like every single night and morning since I'd found out that Mistpelt had hidden the fact that I have more kin, which was a couple of quarter moons ago as of now.

This tossing and turning I had been doing unfortunately, today, had woken up Thornclaw. As soon as he had raised his head, and I met his loving and compassionate blue eyes, I knew that I wanted nothing more than to take a walk out in the forest, just me and him, so that I could clear my head and separate myself a bit.

And some clearing and separating I was doing, indeed! Even just the travel through the camp entrance had made a significant difference, because yes, that's how much Mistpelt's actions had *urked* me. Even days later.

I could never deny the fact that finding more kin was absolutely amazing to me, but the circumstances that it had all been under was a bundle of mouse droppings.

Luckily, Oreo and I were still on perfect terms - I had known since meeting my brother that I wasn't going to let my bitterness towards Mistpelt mess with our relationship.

In fact, once Oreo had left the elders den, I had taken him around camp to introduce him to some cats that were actually willing to talk to him. Goldenshine had been incredibly friendly. And Thornclaw, actually, had been fairly warm towards my brother as

well. Despite his reputation for being quite hostile towards outsiders, he had managed to carry a conversation with the black and white kittypet.

But not to my surprise at all, the first thing that Thornclaw had asked me once Oreo happened to be out of earshot, was what an Oreo was.

Then, the travel that Oreo and I had taken to escort him back was incredibly fun. Just as we had on the way to camp, we talked like we were old friends. Almost like we were "catching up" in a sense, even though we had never met until just earlier that day.

I had been very sad to watch him leap back up onto his fence. Even though we had gotten to talk so much thus far, I still felt such a strong tug to talk to my brother even more. *But I suppose with kin, no amount of time with them will feel like enough...* I had admitted to myself.

But I couldn't help but ask something as I looked up at Oreo. "Would... would you ever consider becoming a Clan cat?"

As he looked back at me, Oreo's hazel eyes did seem to flash with excitement and intrigue for just a moment, but it faded as he shook his head quickly.

"I don't want to hurt your feelings..." he meowed hesitantly before giving me a teasing look. "But no way, no ma'am. I'd rather gouge my eyes out with a fork."

I stared back up at Oreo, dumbfounded and amused at the same time. "I didn't understand half of that."

Oreo *mrrowed* with laughter. "Put more simply - no!" he meowed. "I'll leave the Clan-cat-doing to my sister!"

Sister. It's still so weird to hear another cat call me that! I thought as I nodded in understanding. "Point noted!" I purred back before letting out a disheartened sigh. "Great StarClan, will I miss you."

"And me, you," Oreo meowed, his tail dropping down in sadness despite his warm gaze. "You had better bring those kits here for me

to see once they're old enough!"

His kin. How crazy is that? "Of course I will," I had promised my brother. "Maybe one of them will look like you!"

Oreo sniffed. "That one will be the smartest, I can already tell you that!" he teased. And after purring with amusement, he meowed more softly. "And hey, the situation with Mistpelt will blow over soon, I'm sure."

Soon? I wonder how long "soon" is? I thought to myself, looking back on Oreo's words as Thornclaw and I continued to pad slowly through the forest. *It's definitely not now.*

Thornclaw, as he always did, seemed to sense the irritation bubbling up inside of me. I could see him staring at me out of the corner of my eye, and then I felt his nose touch my ear.

"Do you want to talk about it?" my mate meowed softly to me, implying the Mistpelt situation, I was sure.

My heart welled up with love as I turned back to Thornclaw. *The most supportive mate I could ever ask for*, I thought. *I'd like to think that I can take some credit for that!* As I had overheard Cloudtail tease to Thornclaw, Thornclaw truly had been able to show more vulnerability since falling in love.

And from what I had heard, I was sure that a long time ago he would have *never* prompted a cat to talk about their feelings.

I shrugged and sighed in response to Thornclaw's question. "As much as I would love to, there's not much to talk about," I admitted, trying to keep bitterness out of my meow. "It's a pretty objective situation - Mistpelt hid the fact that I have a brother, and I am angry about it."

Thornclaw let out a quiet purr. "That's true," he agreed, lashing his tail, "And there wasn't any good reason as to why she hid it?"

I snorted and shook my head. "Nope." *Irritating, isn't it?*

Thornclaw brushed a small tuft of snow from my shoulder as he

seemed to be thinking for a few heartbeats. I raised my eyebrows with intrigue once he finally spoke. "Well, I completely understand why this would upset you. And not wanting to have anything to do with Mistpelt would probably be my first impulse too. But..."

I tilted my head with curiosity. "But...?" I encouraged before licking Thornclaw's cheek, making sure that he knew that he could say whatever he needed to, and not offend me.

"But... I just hate that you've been so separated from Mistpelt, especially now that she's in the elders den and growing old," Thornclaw continued. He then lightly brushed his tail along my growing belly. "And what about our kits? I would hate for them not to know their kin, or for them to have a mother that didn't talk to hers. What example would that set?"

As much as I didn't want to admit it, my grudge still strong, Thornclaw was absolutely right. *As upset as I am with Mistpelt, I must set a good example for my kits, and they deserve to know their mother's mother,* I realized. *And as Thornclaw said, Mistpelt is growing old, but...*

"And I'm not at all trying to sound patronizing when I say that," Thornclaw then insisted before I could give him any response. "But..."

A purr rumbling in my throat, I sat down where I was and licked Thornclaw's cheek again. "I know you aren't," I responded softly as I let my head fall to the ground. "And you're right. Doing what I'm doing would set a *terrible* example for these little ones." At my last words, I gestured to my stomach with my tail. "It's just..."

I then looked back up at my mate, and I couldn't help but purr as I met his warm gaze. I took a deep breath as I then meowed, "...How would you feel if one of your family members had lied to you like this? And *twice* too?" I asked Thornclaw, tilting my head and narrowing my eyes. "It wouldn't have hurt them to tell you - they just kept it from you out of selfishness, or no good reason at all. For instance..."

I then stood up, beginning to slowly pace around the area as

Thornclaw watched me. "What if Frostfur had hidden the fact that Brackenfur was your brother, and you didn't find out until you both were fully grown? You'd have realized how much you missed out on..."

I then let out a shaky sigh. "You'd have gone so much time without knowing he was even... *out there*," I meowed in a voice just barely above a whisper, my head lowering once again.

I then felt a tail wrap itself across my back, and a tongue lick my ear. "I would feel confused, hurt, and betrayed," Thornclaw meowed softly as he looked down at me. "Lilypetal, I completely understand."

"You do?" I asked, looking back up at my mate.

"Of course," Thornclaw replied. "And... maybe time away is what you need." I twitched my whiskers with amusement as I realized that Thornclaw was indirectly repeating Brambleclaw's advice. "But I do urge you to not let your grudge get the best of you."

I nodded slowly. *That's fair,* I realized. *That's completely fair.* Another purr began to rumble in my throat as I was suddenly overwhelmed with appreciation. "I completely agree, Thornclaw," I meowed softly as I dug my head into my mate's neck fur. "Thank you. I-"

I then couldn't suppress a hiss as a string of pain ran across my side, and I had to cringe back from Thornclaw to work my way through the pain. *A cat may as well have raked its claws down my flank!*

Thornclaw's pale blue eyes grew wide as he ran up to support me. "Lilypetal!" he exclaimed worriedly. "Are you alright?"

I leaned against Thornclaw, taking slow, deep breaths to work my way through the pain. Thank StarClan, after a few moments, it *finally* faded away.

"Yes, I'm alright," I breathed, forcing myself to stand up again. I then let out a small purr of amusement, running my own tail along my flank. "Just these little troublemakers again." *My lovely little troublemakers...*

Thornclaw let out a sigh of relief as his gaze followed my tail. "Our *troublemakers* have been causing you a lot more pain recently," he pointed out, his eyes a mixture of love and worry. "That's why I was slightly hesitant to take you on this walk!"

I nodded to Thornclaw in agreement, because I did agree, despite how stubborn I had been up until this point. I had wanted to try and serve as a warrior for as long as possible, but my pregnancy symptoms were already much more extreme, relative to my last one. *In just the past few days, my pains have been getting increasingly worse, and my exhaustion shooting up extremely.*

Obviously my body was trying to tell me something, and I had to put the healthy and safety of my kits first.

So, I had decided that I was going to move to the nursery early.

But I hadn't told Thornclaw yet, and I had figured that now would be the best time. "Well, you won't need to fret any longer!" I began, nodding my head in the direction of camp. "I'm going to move to the nursery."

I wasn't surprised at all, and actually let out a *mrrow* of laughter as Thornclaw shot up from where he had been sitting. "You are?" he exclaimed, his eyes wide once again.

I stood as well, luckily not having to wince at any more pain. "Yes, I am!" I reassured my mate. "Your days of extreme worrying are over!"

Thornclaw snorted before touching his nose to mine. "Oh, Lilypetal, you should know by now that the worrying *never* ends," Thornclaw teased. Once he pulled away, he then meowed excitedly. "I'll help you get settled in once we're back in camp."

"-which maybe should be soon!" I commented, shaking some of the snow off of my paws. "Having to trudge through this snow isn't doing me any favors!" *And in a leaf-bare as rough as this one, wandering around in the forest for this long probably isn't the best idea!*

"I hear you," Thornclaw purred, letting me lean on him slightly as

we then traveled in the direction of camp. "Let's go."

The two of us then made our way through the forest, actually having to pause and lick our paws a couple of times in order to keep them from going numb.

Eventually, we found ourselves in one of the many clearings of the ThunderClan forest. This one though, was one I knew very very well. *This is the place that I chased off Ashfur all of those moons ago...* I realized, a shiver running down my spine - not from the cold this time. *In that moment, I had no idea how unsuccessful that mission would be.*

As I glanced around the area, my memories became so vivid, it was almost as if I could see Ashfur emerging from the brambles as he had then.

I then gasped and flicked my ears. *Wait a moment...* I stopped in my tracks as I felt my fur begin to bristle.

It took me a moment to realize that what I was seeing wasn't a memory at all.

Ashfur was standing before me, as real-looking as any living cat.

By now, my fur was spiked out to the point that I looked double my size. *What are you doing here, you flea-pelt?*

"Lilypetal?" Thornclaw asked, following my gaze to look at right where Ashfur was now standing. "What's wrong?"

Thornclaw can't see him! I thought, still in panic. *This is clearly a spirit of some sort. Can you* fight *a spirit?*

A hiss was all I could manage for the moment as I bubbled up with rage. "He's-"

"Who is?" Thornclaw pressed, leaping forward that he was standing beside me once again. He then scanned the area, his nose in the air. "I don't scent anyone else."

I didn't answer Thornclaw for the moment, a growl continuing to

rumble in my throat as I watched Ashfur then flash me a menacing look. He then ran off into the forest, becoming more and more transparent with every pawstep. Eventually, he faded away all together.

For many heartbeats, I stared off at the very place he had disappeared, until Thornclaw ran up and brought me back into focus.

"Lilypetal!" Thornclaw repeated, his voice much sharper to the point of a growl. "What is going on?"

Now finally being able to process the situation, I turned back to my mate. My fur was still spiked, and I found that my legs were beginning to shake. "A-Ashfur-"

Thornclaw didn't let me finish. "*Ashfur?*" he growled, his claws unsheathing into the ground. "Here?"

I lashed my tail, suddenly growing utterly confused as I realized that Thornclaw didn't look shocked at all by what I had just revealed to him - rather, he looked enraged, as if someone had just outed him for something he had been trying to hide.

Hm... "Yes... here," I managed to meow more evenly as I locked gazes with Thornclaw. "Ashfur appeared as a spirit, and then proceeded to run off into the distance and vanish." My eyes narrowed into slits as I padded closer to Thornclaw. "Why this doesn't seem like a surprise to you, I don't know..." I then muttered.

For a just moment, Thornclaw's eyes flashed with anxiety before he sighed and sat down on his haunches.

Oh, dear. The speed of my heartbeat began to increase, just as my fear was. *What in the name of StarClan is he going to say? He clearly knows something that I don't.*

To my surprise, Thornclaw simply shrugged, like he was being asked a casual question.

"It's not a surprise to me... because, well, it's *not*," my mate murmured, standing back up and meeting my gaze again. "Spirit

cats, or whatever you want to call them, can come down from StarClan or the Dark Forest *as* spirits." He then let his gaze flit around the forest once again, almost as if to check if any spirits were around.

I'd never known that before. So that explains why Ashfur was able to come down to hang... I thought as I nodded to the golden tabby tom in understanding. "Is that a cause for worry?" I asked, my voice shaking.

Thornclaw snorted. "Of course it is," he replied, his eyes dark as he continued to patrol the area with his gaze. "If we're looking at the Dark Forest, something like that shows indication of their growing strength."

Another shiver ran down my spine. *If we're looking at the Dark Forest, something like that shows indication of their growing strength...*

I had to admit, I was almost creeped out by how sure Thornclaw seemed of what he was saying. *And unfortunately, I think I know why this is so... "*Do... do you know about this because of your training?" I hesitantly asked, the topic of the Dark Forest still being a fairly touchy subject between the two of us. Thornclaw didn't have much control of the situation, unfortunately, but with all that we had been through because it still made it tough to discuss at times. And the fact that he was still training there despite almost having been killed, worried me to say *the least.*

Thornclaw seemed just as hesitant to answer the question as I had been to ask it. "I do," he meowed evenly, his head lifting to meet my gaze once again. To my complete and utter puzzlement, my mate's gaze was warm. "That is something I managed to find out while I trained there."

Hold on...

I gasped, and my jaw might as well have fallen to the ground. "While I trained there?" I repeated, barely being able to believe what I had just heard. "You make it sound like it's something in the past."

I was questioning him, but Thornclaw's bright and sure gaze said it all. I could barely contain my shock and happiness.

"You..." I breathed as I sat down. "You're not training in the Dark Forest anymore."

Thornclaw purred as he shook his head slowly. "No, I'm not," he replied, padding up to sit next to me. "It was long overdue, wasn't it?"

Oh my StarClan... "Why?" was all I could force out through my complete bewilderment. "How?"

Thornclaw then chuckled as he touched his nose to my cheek, but when I looked up at him, his blue eyes were glowing with guilt. "Simply put - I don't know what I was ever thinking. I've always known that the Dark Forest was dangerous. *You* told me that the Dark Forest was dangerous-"

"Exactly!" I insisted. "Meaning that it would be incredibly difficult for you to even *try* to leave! We agreed that you would just have to be careful."

I continued to stare, dumbfounded, as Thornclaw went on. "Yes, but they're only getting stronger. They're putting their motives into action and..." he then trailed off, shutting his eyes as he shook his head. "I had to leave. I *had* to leave. If there was a chance of me getting out of there, it was going to have to be now, before it was too late to even try. It was the morning that we found out we were expecting kits that made me think."

I narrowed my eyes once again, scooting closer to my mate. "What do you mean?" I questioned softly.

I almost wanted to shiver as I noticed the deep love and passion in Thornclaw's eyes. "I can't waste my time being pulled into Dark Forest training, being manipulated into following their motives. Yes, I originally was training there to try and become a better warrior, but..."

Thornclaw then sighed, his gaze still burning into mine as he went

on. "But... I realized how selfish I was being, how selfish I *have* been for all of these moons."

"Selfish?" I repeated, my eyes wide. "My goodness, Thornclaw, you are hardly-"

"Yes, Lilypetal, I was," Thornclaw insisted, his gaze still burning into mine. "Trying to stand up to those vicious mouse-brains may seem like what is incredibly stupid to do, but not doing anything, scared of the risk of being scolded, is even worse."

A purr began to rumble in my throat as Thornclaw then bent down to touch his muzzle to my head. "My main priority is to ThunderClan, to you, Goldenshine, and these kits. Nothing else. I'm never letting myself fall for their traps again," my mate meowed softly. "Lilypetal, I am so sorry for all I have put you through. Never again."

The emotions you're putting me through right now are more overwhelming than all previous ones combined, I thought to myself as I was overwhelmed with love. *Oh my StarClan, Thornclaw isn't training in the Dark Forest anymore!* The realization made me happier than I could have ever imagined.

"Oh, Thornclaw," I breathed as his familiar scent flooded through my nose. "I don't even know what to say..." *Well, I kind of want to squeal, but that'd just be weird.*

"'Thornclaw, you are the most amazing tom in the entire world', would suffice," my mate teased, licking my head.

"Hm, okay," I purred. "Thornclaw, you are the most amazing tom in the entire world."

Then, for several heartbeats, the two of us stood there, drinking in each other's scents and sharing this moment. I was filled with such a strange feeling of relief, like had been carrying one boulder on each of my shoulders for seasons, and finally, they had both fallen to the side.

But my unease wasn't completely gone.

Yes, Thornclaw had told me that he wasn't training in the Dark Forest anymore, but that didn't change the fact that Ashfur had just appeared in ThunderClan territory, or that Thornclaw had implied something worrisome when it came to the Place of No Stars.

Just the fact that Ashfur went from simply being a voice in my head to a body certainly doesn't indicate anything good...

Thornclaw watched in concern as I finally pulled away from him. I didn't beat around the bush. "What are the Dark Forest planning?" I whispered.

Thornclaw sighed, his gaze solemn as he looked back at me. "All I know is that they are planning *something*," he meowed, his voice giving off a sense of foreboding as he stood up, "And that I didn't want to be a part of it."

I snorted, standing up as well. "Hm, that's still suspicious enough for me," I muttered, flanking Thornclaw as we continued our travel back to camp.

Chapter 14

[image]

Swiftpaw's POV

And... go!

With a hiss of determination, I lept at Ivypool, who was standing just a couple of tail-lengths in front of me. As the she-cat had been commanded, she let me pin her down. *Even though I'm sure I'd be able to pin her down anyway...*

Tigerstar, who was watching, whipped his head over to Blossomfall, who was waiting off to the side. "Go, Blossomfall!" the dark tabby tom barked at her.

Blossomfall gave a single nod before crouching low and slithering towards Ivypool. I lightly dug my claws into the silver-and-white she-cat's shoulders while Blossomfall then lightly slashed her claws along Ivypool's flank.

I tried to ignore the pang of guilt I felt as I heard a small hiss of pain come from her. *It's training... it's just training...*

I almost felt relieved with Tigerstar's next words. "Now, Ivypool, what are you going to do to defend yourself?"

Ivypool seemed to be waiting on that signal as well, immediately using her hind paws to kick me backwards.

Foxdung! I cursed to myself as my grip was released from Ivypool's shoulders. But thinking quickly, I outstretched my forelegs and twisted my body, resulting in me managing to land on my paws. *Yes!*

As I landed, I could just barely hear Ivypool letting out a contemptuous grunt. And I looked back up at her to see that she was rolling her eyes.

At this sight, I felt annoyance bubbling up inside of me. *What, so do you hate me now?* I asked in my mind. *Must I not succeed ever again just because I said "no" to your outrageous offer?*

Using my surge of anger to my advantage, I let out another hiss and leaped back onto Ivypool. The two of us struggled at first, rolling around on the ground for a few heartbeats before I actually was able to pin her down again. Once I was steady, I looked down at my opponent to see two blue flames.

I narrowed my eyes back at the warrior, that being followed by a smirk. "I'd step back, Blossomfall," I muttered, giving a quick nod to the tortoiseshell she-cat who had been watching the two of us from a little ways away. "I think I've got this on my own."

Ivypool's eyes widened as she snorted. "Oh, *do* you?" Ivypool growled as she managed to lift a paw, and unsheathe the claws that came with it. "You're going to rethink that in a couple of moments!"

"Or rather, you'll let Ivypool get up," another voice muttered from behind me, and I whipped my head around quickly to see Ashfur padding up to arrive at our group training session. Nodding to Tigerstar, the gray tom then meowed, "If you don't mind, I'd like to take Swiftpaw and get some individual training in before he wakes up."

"Of course," Tigerstar murmured to Ashfur, then turning back to where I still had Ivypool pinned to the ground. "Fine job, you two. It seems that the both of you had some rage that needed releasing, and it showed. I like that."

Hm, you've got that right, I thought bitterly to myself as I finally backed off of Ivypool to let her stand up. I then watched as she shook out her fur, then flashed me another look full of vexation and whipped around to pad towards her Dark Forest mentor, Hawkfrost.

I watched her for a moment, trying to push down my tugging regret as I began to follow Ashfur. *We went from being friends, to being so cold towards each other so incredibly quickly...* I thought sadly. *I'd even thought that we'd become more than friends someday. But that's not likely now, is it?*

I then sighed as I followed Ashfur through some shrubs. *And even "not likely" is being generous to myself. As long as I'm still refusing to spy, Ivypool's going to despise me.*

I briefly looked back at the clearing that Ashfur and I were leaving, so I could maybe catch another glimpse of the tabby-and-white she-cat, but she was now nowhere in sight.

Rather, I felt a chill run down my spine as my gaze fell on Breezepelt, who was training with his Dark Forest mentor, Brokenstar.

I couldn't hear what the two were saying, but as usual, my father's amber eyes were blazing like fire, his claws digging deep into the earth as Brokenstar's words seemed to form into the indignation that bubbled up inside of the WindClan tom.

I can't even imagine all of the things that Brokenstar puts inside of his head... I thought worriedly as I turned back around, padding a little more quickly to catch up to Ashfur.

The gray-speckled tom was waiting for me in a clearing just a few fox-lengths ahead, his tail twitching impatiently.

I ignored the social cue as I sat down in front of my mentor. "So, why did you pull me away so late?" I wondered out loud, knowing that I had been training for quite a while tonight already. "Surely I'm going to wake up at any moment?"

"And you will," Ashfur replied, dipping his head. "I just wanted to talk to you for a moment."

I held back a hiss. *Holy foxdung.* "About...?" I attempted to meow evenly, despite how nervous I was becoming. There hadn't been many times since my training in the Dark Forest that Ashfur had wanted to *talk* over training. *So it must be important, or worrisome, more like.*

Ashfur stood up, then beginning to walk in a circle around me. "Well, earlier as I watching you train with the others, I just got to thinking..." the tom began. "You've come such a long way already,

Swiftpaw."

I raised my eyebrows, not expecting that to be what would come out of Ashfur's mouth. "Really?" I meowed out of pure intrigue.

"Of course," Ashfur meowed, and I tried not to cringe back as he then sat down beside me, his fur slightly brushing mine. "You're becoming an incredibly tough, quick-thinking, and strong apprentice. I am amazed at how well you have integrated all that I have taught you so far."

He then purred, lightly nudging me with his shoulder, and flicking my ear with his tail. "I don't think I could ask for a better apprentice to bring up."

What kinds of herbs has Ashfur been munching on? I wondered as I looked up at the slightly bigger tom to see nothing but warmth in his typically hostile blue eyes. *Seriously, did he just do some insane mental backflip?*

In fact, his words and his gaze, and his whole demeanor were so warm and welcoming that for a moment, I wondered that if me overhearing all of his motives for me had just been a crazy dream. Maybe Ashfur did truly want me to succeed and see me become a great warrior.

Huh, no. You're smarter than that, Swiftpaw, I told myself as I dipped my head to Ashfur. *Giving Ashfur the benefit of the doubt would be an incredibly risky thing to do.* "Well, thank you," I finally responded to my mentor. "I will continue to try my best." *It's my only option....*

"And I expect you to," Ashfur muttered as he stood up, padding around so that he could sit directly in front of me. "So, what is going on in your ThunderClan training tomorrow?"

"Dustystorm told me that he and Icecloud would be teaching Snowpaw and me some battle moves," I answered, my tail beginning to twitch with excitement at that thought.

Ashfur seemed to reflect my eagerness. "Wonderful," he meowed in an ominous sort of purr, his eyes narrowing. "And you're going to

give it all that you've got, am I correct?" The gray warrior then began to pace about again.

"As you always are, Ashfur," I murmured back. hoping that by saying that, I'd be giving Ashfur exactly what he wanted to hear.

As I had said this, I had begun to notice out of the corner of my eye that the forest around me was beginning to disappear.

"Great," Ashfur responded, his voice sounding like nothing more than a foggy whisper as my surroundings faded away.

"Don't disappoint me, Swiftpaw."

After those last words, my eyes flew open, and I was in the apprentices den once again. I stirred slightly and lifted my head to see the dawn light creeping through the cracks in the den.

Dustystorm had told me to be awake at dawn so we could start training fairly early, I remembered as I stood up and took a stretch. *I've got to hurry.*

I knew that I didn't have much time to dilly-dally, as Dustystorm typically liked to get started as soon as possible. He was definitely very different from Foxleap, who was more lax when it came to training. Some days, after I had been awake for a while, the dark ginger warrior would still be sleeping in the warriors den.

After letting out a yawn, I turned and padded over to Snowpaw, who was curled up into a little ball as she slept.

I reached out a paw and tried to gently shake her awake. "Snowpaw, wake up!" I whispered. "Time for training."

Snowpaw, who I knew to be a fairly light sleeper, was awoken almost immediately, letting out an annoyed groan as she rolled over in her nest. But to my surprise, once her blue gaze met mine, she gasped and shot up to her paws. She even took a step back.

What in the name of StarClan?

"Oh, Swiftpaw! H-hi, there!" she whispered back, her voice shaking

slightly.

I sniffed. "Um, hi?" I replied, an amused purr rumbling in my throat as I stared back at Snowpaw's wide eyes. I then licked a paw and ran it over my head. "What, is my fur ruffled or something?"

I then watched as Snowpaw shook her head quickly, her tense stance relaxing. "No, your fur is completely unruffled," she teased, tapping my head with her tail, though her eyes still glinted with obvious fear. "You just startled me, that's all."

Before I could even reply, Snowpaw walked past me and out of the apprentices den. "Let's go," she murmured as I watched her tail disappear through the entrance. *She can be an odd one, that Snowpaw.*

After sniffing again, feeling quite amused and confused, I followed my friend out of the den. I arrived out into the clearing to find that Dustystorm and Icecloud were already waiting near the camp entrance, both of their heads turning towards me and Snowpaw as we approached them.

Icecloud lashed her tail in greeting. "Good morning, you two!" she purred.

"Feeling awake?" Dustystorm then asked, his whiskers twitching with amusement as he watched Snowpaw gape open her mouth into a yawn.

Still feeling a bit groggy, I blinked my eyes open and closed a few times, almost as if to train them to bring everything into focus. "Sure, we'll go with that," I muttered as I then shook out my fur. "Hopefully some training will help me to be even more so."

"Or maybe the cat that's about to leap on you will," Snowpaw meowed beside me. Confused, I turned to Snowpaw to see that she was indeed looking back at something beyond my sight. I twisted around slightly to see a smaller ginger tabby pelt, crouched down just a tail-length behind me.

I looked back at Snowpaw briefly to see that her eyes were

glittering with humor. "You're welcome," she murmured. "I think I just saved you from quite the *vicious* attack."

Cherrykit let out an annoyed huff as she stood back up. "Thanks a lot!" she exclaimed, trotting up to stand in front of Snowpaw. "I almost had him! He was completely distracted!"

Snowpaw *mrrowed* with laughter. "Sorry! Honestly, I did it for your own good, Cherrykit," the white apprentice purred, lashing her tail towards me. "Surprise-attacking Swiftpaw this early in the morning would only result in some spitting remarks you'd probably rather not hear..."

I rolled my eyes at Snowpaw's words. "Oh, come on!" I groaned. *But honestly, you're not wrong.*

Cherrykit simply shrugged. "Eh, whatever," she murmured, her eyes then brightening as she looked back at me. "I'll get you next time, you'll see!"

"I'm sure you will," I purred as I looked back at Cherrykit. *In your dreams.*

"Cherrykit!" a new voice called out from the direction of the nursery. "I would love to know why you left the nursery by yourself!"

Cherrykit looked back from where she had been glancing at the nursery. "Oops," she meowed, her tail swishing back and forth against the ground. "I should probably get back to Poppyfrost."

Snowpaw and I then exchanged another humored glance as Cherrykit quickly turned around to run towards the nursery. "Have fun training, Swiftpaw! I'm sure you'll be great!" Cherrykit called back. "You too, Snowpaw!"

As Cherrykit disappeared into the den, I heard Snowpaw let out an amused grunt beside me.

I stared at my friend, confused. "What?"

Snowpaw looked back at me, her head shaking slowly as her

narrowed eyes glittered. "Oh, nothing. Nothing at all," she meowed, then turning to look back at Icecloud and Dustystorm. "Are we ready to go?"

"If you are!" Dustystorm replied cheerfully as he and Icecloud began to lead Snowpaw and me out of camp.

Eventually, we arrived to our typical training clearing. Now, it was covered in snow, but still perfectly ready to use. I couldn't help but purr with amusement as I realized that Snowpaw blended in with the snow almost completely.

"Hey, Dustystorm and Icecloud?" I meowed, flashing Snowpaw a look of mischief. "Wasn't Snowpaw supposed to be here too? I don't see her anywhere."

Snowpaw let out an exaggerated gasp, clearly pretending to be deeply offended. "Hey!" she exclaimed, gathering a clump of snow with her paws, then proceeding to throw it at me. I *mrrowed* with laughter, throwing the clump back at her.

This mini snowball fight went on for a few heartbeats, before Dustystorm made his way between us. "When you've quite finished," the sandy-gray tom purred. "I have a suggestion to make."

Snowpaw and I exchanged a half-regretful, half-humored glance before nodding to Dustystorm, prompting him to speak.

Dustystorm's eyes gleamed as he then began to scan his gaze around the forest. "How about once we've finished training for the day, we have some fun and climb some of these trees?" the tom meowed. "It might be a little easier to do while the leaves are gone."

Before I could give Dustystorm any sort of reply, I felt the all-too familiar scratch on my ear.

For the love of... "What now?" I muttered, too quietly for any other cat to hear.

Are you a kit in the nursery again, for goodness sake?! Ashfur barked into my ear. *Playing with snow, for one...*

Whoops, I thought, screwing my eyes shut for just a moment as I reflected on the snowball fight.

And now your mentor wants you to climb trees? Ashfur continued. *What a joke. Put that oblivious kittypet in his place.*

What? How? I suddenly felt immense anger rising inside of me, my frustration of this entire situation settling in. I had been so careless as to do something as kit-like as to messing with snowballs, and now Ashfur was telling me to get after my own mentor.

But I wanted this frustration to stop, and I wanted to get this over with, so of course, I was going to do what Ashfur said.

I let out an infuriated hiss. "Are you kidding?" I growled at Dustystorm, taking a step towards him. "Why in the name of StarClan would we waste precious training time to *climb trees?*"

Dustystorm looked completely dumbfounded by my words. "Well, if you don't want to..." he began.

"Of *course* I don't want to!" I spat back. "We're here to learn how to be warriors, for StarClan's sake! Not squirrels." I then sat down, winded by my own rage. *I had to,* I told myself. *It's what I had to do.*

The three cats in front me of me were silent for many heartbeats. Icecloud and Dustystorm simply looked bewildered, their fur slightly bristled with alarm. While Snowpaw, to my confusion, was staring back at me with her eyes narrowed, not looking shocked at all.

As much as I could analyze the look on my friend's face for days, I could barely stand the tension I had just created. So, I took a deep breath, and nodded to Dustystorm as an attempt at an apology. "I'm just here to train," I muttered. "I don't see anything wrong with that."

Dustystorm slowly nodded back at me, his eyes narrowing into two slits, but he still seemed to be finding a way to reply.

I looked back at Snowpaw once again to see that she was still giving me the same mysterious look. After a few heartbeats, she actually

turned back to Icecloud and Dustystorm, cleared her throat, and spoke. "So, what are we doing today?"

Our mentors seemed relieved to be able to have a clear way to get past the horrible awkwardness. Icecloud meowed evenly, "We're going to get into some more battle training."

I watched curiously as Snowpaw's eyes suddenly widened. "Battle training?" she repeated. *What's her problem?*

"Yes," Dustystorm meowed, his voice sounding much more lighthearted as he padded up to stand in front of Snowpaw and me. "Let's get into it right now, so we can loosen up a bit."

That was a personal jab at me if I've ever heard one, I realized bitterly.

From there, Dustystorm and Icecloud proceeded to teach the two of us the Half-Turn Belly Rake - a move I was already very familiar with, thanks to the Dark Forest. It had its benefits, that's for sure.

Once our two mentors had watched me and Snowpaw practice the move individually for a little while, Icecloud gave a single nod, commanding the two of us to stand up again.

After she shared a glance with Dustystorm, she looked back at us and spoke. "Alright, I think you all are ready to try this move on each other."

I flicked my ears, startled, as Snowpaw gasped and stood up from where she had been crouching. "Um... I think I need more time to practice on my own," she murmured quickly.

Icecloud snorted, padding up to nudge Snowpaw on the shoulder with her tail. "Nonsense! I've been watching you, and you've got it down," Icecloud insisted, her gaze then falling on me. "And so does Swiftpaw. How about you try the move on her, first?"

My eyes narrowed as I continued to watch Snowpaw, who clearly was trying to fight back anxiety, for whatever reason. "Sure," I muttered, taking a few steps forward to get in the proper placement.

"Okay," Dustystorm meowed as Icecloud padded back up to sit next to him. "Whenever you're ready."

I'm ready. Snowpaw however... I thought as I stared back at the white she-cat's wide eyes. I tilted my head and gave her a questioning look.

Snowpaw then sighed and gave me a quick nod. "Just go," she whispered back to me.

If you say so...

As I crouched down, preparing to leap, Ashfur's voice rang inside of my head once again. *Give it all that you've got, Swiftpaw.*

As these words processed, I then leaped towards Snowpaw, then turning onto my side and slipping under her belly. Not even realizing that my claws were unsheathed. When it came to fighting in the Dark Forest, it was all that I was used to. I then rolled back onto all fours from under Snowpaw.

Yes, yes! Ashfur praised me. *Why stop here? Keep going!*

What?! Keep going?

Yes, keep going! Ashfur continued to urge. *Come on, Swiftpaw. What do you have to lose? If anything, it will look good to your mentor.*

Fine!

Giving Snowpaw a silent apology, I stood up and leaped back onto her, pinning her down. To my surprise, once I had landed onto the she-cat, I barely felt any resistance.

It was then that I realized that both Icecloud and Dustystorm were speaking, or, shouting into my ear, rather.

"Swiftpaw! What are you doing?" Dustystorm growled. "Get off of Snowpaw right now, she's hurt!"

What?!

Actually being able to get a good look at Snowpaw for the first time since our mock-battle, I was utterly shocked and sickened to see her blue eyes glistened over with pain. Her stomach was red with some fresh gashes I had given to her.

Oh my StarClan, I thought as I quickly backed off of the she-cat, watching as Dustystorm and Icecloud helped her to her paws. *I just hurt my best friend.*

"*Way* too far, Swiftpaw!" Dustystorm scolded to me, his blue eyes shining with anger. He then nodded to Snowpaw's belly wound. "Keep your claws *sheathed* next time!"

Icecloud flashed me a cold look before nodding in the direction of camp. "Swiftpaw can get the stern talking to he deserves later," Icecloud meowed bedgrudingly. "Right now we need to get Snowpaw to the medicine den. Come on."

I stood there, still completely astonished by my own actions as the three other cats in the clearing padded past me. *How could I have done such a thing?* I thought, unsheathing my claws and digging them into the ground. I had only given Snowpaw a few scratches along her belly; I was no medicine cat, but I knew she was going to be okay. Yet, with the amount of guilt I currently felt, I may as well have *killed* her.

Just as Dustystorm, Snowpaw, and Icecloud were about to disappear from my vision, I began to follow them, ready to apologize profusely to my friend.

Stop.

I paused mid-run at Ashfur's command.

Don't feel guilty about this, Swiftpaw, Ashfur commanded more softly.

"How could I not?" I hissed to Ashfur out loud. "I just hurt my Clanmate, my *friend!*"

And did she bother to defend herself? No! Ashfur barked back. *She's just as weak as I thought, for goodness sake! She doesn't deserve any sort of apology, if that's what you were planning on giving her...*

I sighed with exasperation as I processed Ashfur's words. "...No, I wasn't..." I breathed.

Good, Ashfur meowed. *Now, how about you make yourself useful and go for a hunt?*

I shrugged and grunted with agreement. *Once cats back in camp hear what happened, they won't want to even look at me for a while, anyway,* I realized, beginning to pad off into the forest. *Let's go hunting.*

Chapter 15

[image]

Goldenshine's POV

I almost felt as if I was sprinting across ice as I pelted through the forest after a small tuft of fur. *Faster, Goldenshine, faster!* I told myself. *You can't afford to lose even one scrap of prey right now!*

When I decided that the time was right, I leaped forward with my claws outstretched, bowling over and trapping the scrawny shrew in my grip. I sank my teeth into it, then tossed its limp body to the ground.

I let out a small grunt of satisfaction. *And that is how you do it!*

"Did you catch it?" a voice called from behind me. I picked up the prey in my jaws and turned to see Nightwing approaching. Her green eyes lit up when they fell on the shrew. "Oh, thank StarClan!" she purred as we began to pad side by side to return to the rest of our hunting patrol.

Thank StarClan, indeed!

"To be honest, I was almost sure that you *weren't* going to catch it!" Nightwing continued.

"Gee, thanks," I meowed through my full mouth of fur. *Support from your best friend is the absolute best,* I thought sarcastically.

Nightwing then purred with amusement as she nudged me with her shoulder. "No, silly. That's not what I meant," my friend purred, her gaze now full of concern. "You just seemed in your own world when it started to run off. I had to snap you out of it!"

Yeah, that's true... unfortunately, I thought to myself, taking a moment to dig up a small hole in the ground and bury my prey. *I could've cost a few cats a meal if you hadn't yelled into my ear.*

Nightwing and I, on our hunting patrol with Toadstep and Rosepetal, had spotted a small shrew at nearly the same time. Nightwing was going to scare it into my direction, then I was to get a hold of it and make the killing bite.

But thanks to me, things hadn't gone to plan. I was so stuck in my own thoughts, that when the shrew dashed past me, I had had no idea.

But thank StarClan, I caught it, I tried to tell myself. *I can't imagine the amount of guilt I would feel if I lost a piece of prey just because I got caught up in personal problems.*

I sniffed in response to Nightwing's words. "The only excuse I can give you is that I could've gotten more sleep last night!" I lied.

And I say "lied" because *yes,* I was completely lying. Well, I suppose that frequently going on dawn patrol didn't help me, but that's not why I almost missed the shrew.

I had had a lot on my mind over the past moon. I mean, I *always* did, considering I had the stress of Swiftpaw's suspicious behavior, as well as Snowpaw hanging on my shoulders.

Since Dustystorm had begun to train Swiftpaw, he would always give me a brief report after their training sessions, as I had asked him to. But, as time went by, I think Dustystorm's reports were becoming more out of concern for Swiftpaw rather than curtesy to me.

I had begun to feel dizzy when my mate, along with Icecloud, had brought Snowpaw into camp, blood oozing from her belly. Once Dustystorm had helped her into the medicine den, he had been quick to approach me to tell me what had happened.

I hadn't been shocked at all, but sickened as he revealed to me that Swiftpaw had hurt Snowpaw, and what looked like on purpose. What had been even more nauseating was the fact that Swiftpaw had not returned to camp with Snowpaw, Icecloud, and Dustystorm.

Rather, he hadn't returned until the sun began to set. A few cats had

given him suspicious looks as he emerged through the camp entrance. My son's eyes had been dark, but unreadable, as he padded through the clearing and disappeared into the apprentices den without a single word.

Since then, things hadn't improved. According to Dustystorm, with each training session, Swiftpaw seemed to grow more distant and aggressive, never wanting to do anything other than training; fighting or hunting, nothing else.

Basically, having any sort of fun seemed to be my son's worst enemy at this point. Snowpaw managed to joke around with him every once in a while, but that was about it.

Thank StarClan for her, I thought. *And for the fact that she even was able to forgive Swiftpaw in the first place. Although I can tell that she doesn't seem nearly as comfortable with him as she did before... Oh, Snowflight, I wish I knew what you were thinking!*

Along with all of that loveliness, the bone-chilling dream that I had experienced - Swiftpaw as a kit in the nursery, he and Snowpaw glaring at each other, and Snowpaw facing off with Ashfur - was still lingering in my mind as if it was completely fresh.

Of course, since Jayfeather was still gone, I couldn't ask him what he thought. What was this indicating about Snowpaw? Why were she and Swiftpaw facing off? Why was Ashfur fighting her?

It was all too confusing and vague for my own good. But that's how StarClan goes, I guess.

And there was no way that I was going to ask any other cat about it. Not even Lilypetal or Thornclaw, two cats I could be *sure* had noticed Swiftpaw's conduct, and who also knew about Snowflight's return. With my mother's kits coming so soon, I didn't want to add something else for the two of them to worry about.

All that should matter for Lilypetal right now are those little bundles, my siblings, that she is carrying! I managed to think more happily. It had now been about two moons since Lilypetal had told me she was expecting, but time certainly wasn't the only indication that the kits

were coming soon.

Her belly is as big as ever! So big that she has trouble walking for long periods of time! I joked to myself. *There are at least two or three kits in there, and I'll get to see their little faces any day now!*

I let out a long sigh as I padded alongside the rest of the hunting patrol, all of our heads high and mouths open, trying to catch any signs of prey nearby. *At least that's one thing that takes me away from my stresses.*

"No way!" I heard Toadstep exclaim at the front of the patrol, pulling my away from my thoughts.

"What, you mouse-brain?" Rosepetal purred, padding up to join her brother. "It had better be important, because you probably just scared what was left of prey in the forest!"

Toadstep snorted with contempt, flashing Rosepetal a teasing look. "Fine," he murmured, nodding to something ahead. "Do you want me to pretend that I don't see four ThunderClan cats across the lake?"

I let out a gasp that was probably louder than Toadstep's original exclamation. *What!? No way!*

I practically scrambled up to stand on Toadstep's other side, Nightwing following just a heartbeat later. *Could it be?*

Sure enough, in the distance, I could see the four familiar pelts of Squirrelflight, Foxleap, Dovewing, *and Jayfeather!* I thought, suddenly being overwhelmed with relief. *I no longer have to walk around feeling like a walking ball of cluelessness!*

Once the returning patrol caught sight of us, they quickened their pace, only taking a few heartbeats to arrive to where our hunting patrol was waiting.

I was the first one to meet them. "You're back!" I exclaimed, not being able to help jumping up in the air with excitement. "You're *all* back! And in one piece!" *Well,* four *pieces.*

"Thank goodness!" Rosepetal breathed after every cat had purred with amusement at my words. "Did you all have a safe journey back?"

My gaze moved to Squirrelflight as I saw her nod. "This was now the third time that I've journeyed back here from the mountains," the dark ginger she-cat pointed out. "It actually gets a little easier each time."

"I agree!" Dovewing purred, briefly glancing back at the way the patrol had come. "It was no trouble at all."

"No trouble?" Foxleap replied, his eyes wide as he lifted one of his paws from the ground. "My paws feel like they're going to fall off from all of that walking!"

I flicked my ears and purred with amusement as Nightwing then padded past us, heading in the direction of camp. "In that case, let's go home!" the black she-cat insisted. "I'm sure you all are exhausted."

Foxleap snorted beside me. "*Exhausted* only puts it lightly."

I fell into step beside the reddish-tabby warrior as we began to travel. "Is exhaustion all you can think about?" I teased, flicking his ear with my tail. "You were chosen to go on a journey to the mountains, and you returned home safely, for StarClan's sake!"

"Very true," Foxleap agreed. "But that doesn't change the fact that I could fall asleep on my paws right now!"

"Understandable!" I meowed.

"So," Foxleap then began as we crawled through the gorse tunnel and into camp. "How was my apprentice while I was gone?"

Well, shoot. "Um..." I began, actually having no idea how much I was going to reveal to Swiftpaw's mentor.

"I have to admit..." Foxleap went on before I could even answer. "I've missed that uptight little furball. Who took over as his mentor?"

Okay, a much easier question. "Dustystorm," I replied simply.

I was happy to see Foxleap's green eyes light up. "Dustystorm? That's a great choice!" the warrior purred as we settled down near the Highledge, waiting while Jayfeather visited Firestar in his den to report about the journey. "How did Dustystorm do with that little rascal?"

Well, Dustystorm has said that Swiftpaw is doing exceptionally well in his hunting and battle training. Where he falls short is on social skills... or simple moral decency, I reflected. *So, I guess it's not a lie to tell Foxleap that Swiftpaw has been doing well.*

"He's showing a lot of promise," I replied to Foxleap, trying to sound as cheerful as possible. "From what I've heard from Dustystorm, he's learned a lot over the past moon."

Foxleap then snorted. "Hopefully not too much! I'll want Swiftpaw to remember *me* as the best out of his two mentors, of course!"

"Oh, please!" I exclaimed, my meow full of laughter. "If anything, he'll remember what a conceited flea-brain you were!"

"The conceited flea-brain that was a better mentor!" Foxleap purred, and after I rolled my eyes, I watched as Foxleap nodded towards the apprentices den. "Did Dustystorm manage to loosen him up at all?"

I then hesitated for several heartbeats, my heart beginning to pound. I mean, how was I supposed to tell Foxleap how much *worse* Swiftpaw had gotten? *If I don't tell him, he'll surely notice...*

Luckily, I never had to answer to Foxleap. Just as I was about to open my mouth, having no idea what words were even going to come out, Firestar appeared from his den with Jayfeather right behind him.

Firestar quickly leaped down from the Highledge, his emerald eyes gleaming as they fell on where we were waiting. "Welcome back!" the ginger tom purred, touching his nose to Squirrelflight's and nodding to Foxleap and Dovewing.

The rest of the ThunderClan leader's words were lost on me as my

attention fell on Jayfeather, who had began to travel straight to the medicine den clearing after leaving Firestar's den.

I gave a quick nod to the cats gathered around Firestar, not even being sure if they noticed it, before following the gray tabby tom. *I may not even ask Jayfeather about the dream right now*, I decided, figuring that he was completely worn out.

As I padded along, I nodded to Leafpool, who was doing exercises with Briarlight nearby. Their gazes seemed to be following Jayfeather as he disappeared into the medicine den.

But I at least want to check in, and hear all about what happened on his journey! If he doesn't shred my eyeballs out first...

Despite this, I took my chances, crawling through the bramble screen and purring to Jayfeather in greeting. "Hey! Long time, no see, huh?" I meowed, settling down near the entrance. "How are you doing? Would you like me to get you something to eat?" *I could fetch you that shrew that I completely forgot to retrieve out in the forest...* I realized, quietly snorting to myself. *I guess I know what I'm doing later...*

"I'm tired," Jayfeather muttered, turning around to face me. "And I'm fine, thanks."

"Sure," I replied, giving Jayfeather a single nod, even though he couldn't see it. I could see already how truly fatigued Jayfeather was, so much so that his mind seemed to be somewhere else. So, I decided to keep the conversation fairly simple. "So, how was it in the mountains? Did you accomplish what you needed to?"

"I did," Jayfeather responded, showing some satisfaction through a single lash of his tail. "I appointed the new Stoneteller - Crag Where Eagles Nest."

I gasped in awe at Jayfeather's words. "No way!" I breathed. "That's like the leader *and* the medicine cat, right?"

"It's an important position," Jayfeather commented, clearly sensing my shock.

"It sounds like it!" I agreed.

I then dipped my head in farewell, standing up and beginning to pad out of the den. *I'm definitely not telling Jayfeather about the dream right now,* I concluded, having observed the fogginess and exhaustion in the blind medicine cat's eyes. "Well, that's awesome. I'm glad you all returned to ThunderClan safely."

To my surprise, as soon as I turned around, I heard a snort come from Jayfeather. "Wait, you mouse-brain!" he called back to me.

I turned back around to face the tabby tom. "What?" I inquired, tilting my head to the side.

"What you do mean, *what?*" Jayfeather replied, rolling his blind eyes at me. "You were the one practically in hysterics before I left!"

"Oh, please, I was not in hysterics," I insisted as I sat down again. "Anyways, I think I had every right to be worried, especially considering that..." I trailed off, still hesitant to reveal what I had seen to Jayfeather so soon after his journey.

Jayfeather seemed to put all of that behind him for the time being though. His blue eyes stared intently back at me as he waited for me to continue. "Considering what?" he pressed, his eyes slowly narrowing down into two slits. "Goldenshine, what happened while I was gone?"

I shrugged, hesitating for just a moment. "Well, I wasn't going to tell you until after you had rested for a little bit..."

"Forget that!" Jayfeather hissed, taking another step closer to me. "Did something happen with Snowflight... I mean, Snowpaw, while I was gone?"

I tried to ignore the flash of pain I had seen in Jayfeather's eyes as he had spoken. *It only shows at times now, but it is clear that Jayfeather still misses my sister very much...* I realized before finally answering. "Yes. At least I *think,*" I began, trying to recall what I had witnessed in my sleep many days ago now. "I had a dream-"

"A dream or a vision?" Jayfeather pressed, cutting me off.

"I don't know," I admitted.

"That sure helps," Jayfeather muttered sarcastically.

"Oh, come on!" I groaned, rolling my eyes. "I mean, I don't know for *sure*, but maybe you'll know once I tell you..."

I then proceeded to explain to Jayfeather exactly what I had seen, even parts that maybe didn't feel as relevant, just in case - from me playing with Swiftpaw in the nursery, Snowpaw staring intently back at him, to the two of them being fully-grown and staring back at each other, to Snowpaw fighting Ashfur.

Jayfeather had simply listened, not uttering a single word, only nodding with his blue eyes narrowed. But, it seemed the longer I went on with my description, the bigger his eyes got.

By the time I had finished, the usually closed-off medicine cat looked completely baffled. At this sight, I felt a twinge of satisfaction, because something had clearly cliqued in Jayfeather's mind. But I also felt immense anxiety begin to rise up inside of me, because that meant that Jayfeather might have an explanation for it.

What made me even more nervous was that Jayfeather didn't say a word for many heartbeats, seemingly staring off at nothing as he drifted into his own thoughts.

I could barely handle the anticipation, so I let out a huff and lightly flicked Jayfeather on the ear with my tail, knowing that waving it in front of his face would be pointless. "Jayfeather," I tried to meow evenly. "What's up? Tell me what you're thinking. Does it mean anything?"

It was many moments after that before Jayfeather finally spoke. "It all makes sense now..." he whispered.

My tail began to twitch back and forth incredibly quickly. "What? What does?" I couldn't help but pester. "My dream?"

"Your vision," Jayfeather meowed, finally seeming to bring himself back into full focus.

I felt my eyes widening. "So it *was* a vision?" *Holy foxdung, holy foxdung...* "Not a dream? How do you know?"

I was thrown off guard as Jayfeather let out an annoyed huff. "For StarClan's sake, you have countless questions pent up in there, don't you?" he hissed through gritted teeth.

"Sorry," I muttered, shaking my head quickly. "How do you know that what I saw wasn't a dream?"

Jayfeather then seemed to calm down, letting out a shaky sigh. For some reason, I felt a shiver run down my spine as I waited for his answer.

"I know..." Jayfeather began. "Because I've had one... *several*, rather, that were almost identical."

Shut the heck up... "How?" was all I could force out through my mystification. *I had a vision, one that a* medicine cat *also had?*

"You know how I told you that I've had visions of Snowpaw fighting another cat, but I couldn't tell who it was?" Jayfeather asked.

I simply nodded, prompting the medicine cat to continue.

Jayfeather began to shake his head slowly. "Well... for a while I assumed that, like you did with your vision, that it was just some weird flashback," he meowed, his eyes growing dark. "Maybe it was Snowflight... facing off Ashfur before..."

"I get it," I murmured, my voice cracking with emotion, not wanting Jayfeather to mention the idea of Snowflight's horrific murder out loud.

"And I even questioned if it *was* Ashfur for a while. Sometimes the images that I saw were bleary," the medicine cat continued. "But from what you saw, what *I* saw makes more sense - this isn't any sort of flashback. It's a forewarning."

A forewarning... the word sent a chill down my spine. I stood there, my shock leaving me practically frozen now. "How can you be sure?"

My stomach twisted as I saw Jayfeather's blind eyes flash with pain once again. "Because the first time that I had any sort of dream like this was the night before Snowflight died," Jayfeather meowed, just barely above a whisper.

My mouth dropped as Jayfeather continued. "I saw Snowpaw, not Snowflight, facing off with Ashfur, somewhere dark," he murmured, clearly trying to recall memories from quite a while ago. "Then, I saw images of Snowflight wandering in the forest, and then her body after..." Jayfeather then paused, sounding too pained to go on.

Whoa...

Jayfeather then shook his head quickly. "Basically, through that vision, I was being shown what was to happen in the future," the gray tabby tom explained. "And it has, only partly..."

I then found myself holding my breath as Jayfeather's gaze darkened once again. "I think that StarClan was showing you the one part that hasn't come true yet."

"My goodness," I breathed as I began to process Jayfeather's explanation. "Snowpaw fighting Ashfur? Under what circumstances?" *No matter what they would be, it's terrifying to think about...* "And what about her and Swiftpaw? We still have no idea what that meant."

Jayfeather and I then almost simultaneously sighed with exasperation, feeling burned out from this lengthy discussion. Despite our discoveries, what could we do? There's not much point to receiving information if you can't do anything with it.

After lots of my own empty contemplation, I nearly flinched as Jayfeather stiffened beside me, his ears pricking with what looked like understanding.

"Wait a moment..." Jayfeather breathed, before turning his head to face me once again. "I may have an idea."

Oh my StarClan. "What? *What?*" I pressed, trying to keep myself from hopping up and down. "Tell me!"

For some reason, Jayfeather looked hesitant *to* tell me, but the certainty in his eyes was unmistakeable. "It's a pawful..." was all he answered at first.

Are you kidding me? "Give me all of the pawfuls you want!" I insisted, throwing my head up in the air. "Just tell me what your thoughts are."

Jayfeather briefly flashed me an annoyed look before sighing again. "Well... first, about Swiftpaw..."

Wait, so Jayfeather knows something about Swiftpaw as well as Snowflight's destiny? I realized. *I have never wanted to hear a cat speak more in my entire life...*

I nodded eagerly just as Jayfeather went on. "He... he's-"

Suddenly, Jayfeather's meow was interrupted by an earsplitting yowl - actually louder than anything I had ever heard. To my dismay, it was clearly a yowl of pain.

And it had come from the direction of the nursery.

Chapter 16

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

I didn't think it was possible to feel so much pain all at once.

My body felt as if I had fallen from the top of a tree onto jagged rocks, and then shredded to bits by a group of ferocious badgers. StarClan might as well have taken every time I've felt pain in my entire life and lumped it all together.

But I don't even think that would match up to this.

I was having my kits, I knew it. The initial feeling had been all-too familiar. I had experienced aching and extreme discomfort all day, and I, of course, had known that it could happen at any time now.

But why it was hurting this much? I had no idea.

Thornclaw, who had luckily been right next to me, had burst from the nursery as soon as I had let out my first screech of agony. Once I had watched his golden tabby tail disappear through the entrance, I screwed my eyes shut, and found that my breaths were becoming quicker and shallower.

It was already becoming too much to bear. "Foxdung, foxdung, foxdung..." I began muttering under my breath. *Maybe if I throw myself in the ice-cold lake, the pain will go away.*

Just barely, I could hear the pawsteps of Ferncloud, Daisy, and Poppyfrost quickly approaching me. The next thing I knew, Ferncloud was hovering over me, her green eyes warm. I could also feel a tail lightly stroking my flank.

"Breath, Lilypetal," I could hear Daisy meowing softly. "Remember to breath."

But I can't! I thought as I began to well up with panic. It seemed to

be getting harder and harder to take in air with each moment that passed. *What's happening?*

Although Thornclaw had only left the nursery heartbeats ago, it had already felt like countless eternities. I couldn't have appreciated the support from the other queens more, but truthfully, I didn't know how much longer I could last without a medicine cat.

The pain and suffering I was currently experiencing was pulling me away from my right mind, so I vocalized this. Although, it came out as a quiet, weak rasp. "Last time I checked, we had a *medicine cat* in this Clan, didn't we?"

"Jayfeather and Leafpool are probably gathering the supplies that they need, Lilypetal," I heard Poppyfrost reply, not seeming to be phased by my aggressive jab at the medicine cats. "They will be here soon."

"Soon" is too long. Much, much too long, I thought as I unsheathed my claws and dug them into the ground, finding any means possible to fight through this unbearable pain. *StarClan, do everything in your power to help me!*

My vision was actually *spotted* once Thornclaw came into sight again, Leafpool and Jayfeather right behind him. I was only able to feel a twinge of excitement before another wave of pain ran through my stomach, and I let out a hoarse gasp.

It will be over soon, I tried to tell myself. *It will be over soon, and later you will have your beautiful kits right here...*

The optimistic thought almost made me more exhausted. My head fell to the ground as I began to pant. *I can barely move. How will I be able to push kits out?*

"Try to breath more steadily," I heard Thornclaw meow close to me, his voice shaking slightly, but I could tell that he was trying to speak evenly. I then managed to feel slightly comforted as my mate's scent wafted over me, and I felt him curling himself around me, beginning to lick my head slowly. "Please, Lilypetal. You can do it."

I dug my head into Thornclaw's fur as I continued to fight the pain. "I'm..." I wheezed. "trying..." *You know how to breath. You've done it your whole life. So why isn't it working?*

I cringed back slightly as Leafpool then felt at my belly. I turned my head to see the familiar positions of the two medicine cats.

They were ready. But was I?

"Alright, Lilypetal, you know the drill," Leafpool meowed, stroking my belly with one of her paws. "I know that it hurts, but we're here to help you. You have to push."

Leafpool's words had been incredibly foggy, but I understood. I managed to give the former medicine cat a weak nod before letting my head drop to the floor again.

I then felt Thornclaw pressed his muzzle against my cheek. "Hang in there, my love," he whispered into my ear as he wound his tail around mine. "Hold it as tightly as you need to."

I knew that by doing that, I'd probably cut my mate's tail in half. "Thornclaw... but I don't want to hurt-"

"I don't care," he meowed more sharply. "Hold onto my tail, for StarClan's sake!"

I nodded feebly, then practically squeezed Thornclaw's tail with my own as I attempted to push.

But it was hard, practically impossible.

I could tell that I wasn't the only one struggling, or noticing that something was clearly going wrong. I could feel that Thornclaw's fur was bristling next to me, and Leafpool, who had been able to overflow me with encouragement in my first kitting, was silent in concentration.

Nevertheless, I tried with all of my might to push. Through my pain, I couldn't even tell if anything was being accomplished. All I knew was that each attempt resulted in more pain, and I was growing weaker and weaker.

After several heartbeats, Thornclaw demanded, "What's going on?"

I could just barely hear Jayfeather's response. "She's losing a lot of blood."

As scary as that was to hear, there was no way that I could respond. All I could do was keep going.

I'm bringing these kits into the world if it's the last thing I do!

"No!" I could hear Thornclaw exclaim in response to Jayfeather's words. I then felt the tabby tom's breath on my ear again. "Lilypetal, stay with me. Please!"

At this point, I couldn't even speak, only nod. I wasn't even sure if Thornclaw could tell, though. *Oh, my love, please don't worry...*

"Thornclaw, I'm going to have to ask you to stay back," Leafpool meowed briskly.

I screwed my eyes shut all the way again as I heard my mate's hiss. "*What?* No!" Thornclaw growled. "I am *not* leaving her!"

"The first kit is coming, and Lilypetal must concentrate and have her space," Leafpool replied even more sharply. "You do want her to focus, don't you?"

If Thornclaw gave any sort of verbal response, I didn't catch it. But he did as Leafpool commanded, and my heart sank as he loosened his grip on my tail.

I then felt Leafpool press one of her paws harder into my belly. "Lilypetal, you're doing a great job," she finally praised me. "The first kit is coming. Try to take deep breaths, and take your time."

The first kit is coming... the first kit is coming...

That is what I continuously repeated to myself through my strife.

And eventually, I heard a small yowl of triumph come from what sounded like Daisy.

"Your first kit has arrived, Lilypetal," Leafpool meowed softly. "Thornclaw, come over here and assist with this little one, please."

I could hear Thornclaw quickly padding over from where he had been pacing back and forth across the den. After a few heartbeats, he let out a thick, emotion-filled purr. "A tom."

A tom! I thought excitedly. *Oh, our first son!* The love in my heart was so strong, that my pain actually felt nonexistent for just a moment.

Despite all of the things that were plainly going wrong, it gave me a bit of strength to use to keep going. Eventually resulting in another kit coming into the world.

"Another tom," Jayfeather muttered as I felt another ball of fluff being placed at my belly.

"One more to go," Leafpool meowed, and I tried to tell myself that I was imagining the nervousness that I heard in her voice.

Who knows at this point? I could barely hear.

The fight to push the first two kits out had sucked out nearly everything I had. My vision was spotted once again, I was still fighting for breath, and I continued to grow weaker.

I was losing consciousness. *Or worse...* I thought nervously. *Oh, StarClan... please don't take me now!*

After many moments of more struggle, Thornclaw panicking, and Leafpool, Jayfeather, and the other queens whispering to each other nervously, I was almost sure that I couldn't take anymore. Grasping for air felt unfeasible, let alone pushing out another kit.

Suddenly, I heard the rustle of moss and hard pawsteps, and Thornclaw's scent flooded into my nose once again. "Leafpool, please, let me help her." From what I could make out, my mate sounded practically helpless.

Before I could even attempt to catch Leafpool's reply, I felt the most insufferable pain of them all, and my vision began to slowly

disappear. My head felt empty, and I couldn't move.

"A she-cat. Lilypetal, you've done it!"

Thornclaw's meow was the last thing I could hear as I fell into complete darkness. "Lilypetal, it's alright... you're fine... you've got to be..."

"Come on, our kits are here!"

~>~>~>~>~>~>~>~>~

Where am I?

Opening my eyes and not being in the nursery anymore, also being completely free of pain, had definitely been the most trippy thing I had experienced.

I immediately stood up in alarm, whipping my head around in order to try and capture every piece of my surroundings.

And unfortunately, these surroundings were familiar.

I was surrounded by trees that encapsulated a small grassy clearing. A small, glittering stream flowed nearby. And what would usually be a beautiful sight to see, was something that made my heart sink. This was because everything around me seemed to be glowing.

I'm in StarClan, I realized, a shiver running down my spine. *Did... did I die from my kitting?*

I found that I was bubbling up with an overwhelming amount of emotion - thoughts of grief, pain, sadness, loss... I would never get to know my second litter, see Thornclaw again, Goldenshine, my friends, or Mistpelt... *Or Oreo, who I'd only just met!*

But I ruthlessly pushed it all down. *Calm down. You don't know that for sure*, I told myself. *Maybe I'm just dreaming.*

I then took a deep breath. "Just look around, Lilypetal," I murmured out loud to myself. "Go with the flow. You know how to do that, right?"

I decided to pad deeper into the starlit forest, not having a single worry as to whether or not I might get lost. I was in StarClan, or a dream - either way, I'd be fine.

As I left the clearing behind, crawling through some large shrubs, I gasped in awe as I saw what was ahead of me.

An entire forest full of starlight seemed to stretch ahead infinitely. I almost wanted to burst out into the fastest run I could, and see where it took me.

I then shook my head quickly. *Wait... why can't I? I'm dreaming!*

As I crouched down low, preparing to leap ahead, I pushed down my tugging sad thoughts once again. *At least, I really, really hope I am dreaming.*

I broke into a run, practically feeling like I was flying as I swiftly dodged rocks and trees, then leaping over bushes and small holes. It felt so incredible and exhilarating. I hadn't been able to run and frolic like this for moons, now!

And what was even better, was that my energy wasn't faltering at all. *For the past moon, I've felt like collapsing even after a few pawsteps!*

I most definitely could have run like that forever, taking in the magnificent surroundings...

But I found myself skidding to a halt as the sparkly, shining forest... *stopped.*

Yes, ahead of me, the trees continued, but they were tall and dark, no starlight there at all.

Just as I had with StarClan, I recognized immediately what this place was. *This is the border between StarClan and the Dark Forest.*

Unfortunately, I was somewhat familiar with the Dark Forest. The night that Ashfur had come to me in a dream, showing me his plans for Swiftpaw, had been sickening to see. Just *being* in that dreary, shadowy place had been awful enough.

But nevertheless, I couldn't bring myself to turn around. Not when I knew that a certain gray-pelted fox-heart could just be foxlengths ahead of me. *Maybe I could find him, and shred him to bits right now!* I thought as I found determination rising up inside of me. *Then, I could wake up knowing that my new kits are going to be safe!*

But I also had to be logical. There would be too much at stake if I attempted to clobber the mouse-brain.

Picking a fight in his own territory would be incredibly risky, for one. Also, what if he... "won"? There would be no chance that I could return to ThunderClan. *I might even be trapped in the Dark Forest...*

Letting out a slightly regretful huff, I turned around and began to slowly pad in the direction I had come, having no idea where I was even going to go. *Maybe I'll have a go at finding some other StarClan cats!* I decided. *They'll be able to tell me what's going on with me... but I almost don't want to know.*

"Going somewhere?"

I completely froze mid-step as I instantly recognized the menacing voice of my worst enemy. *Holy foxdung.*

I tried to hide my reluctance and fear as I slowly turned around to face the gray speckled Dark Forest warrior. "Gee, you sure like to come on cue, don't you?" I muttered, not sure if Ashfur could even hear me.

Ashfur simply sniffed in response. "Miss me?"

"*Miss* you? You never left, you fox-heart!" I hissed back, my fur rising. "What are you doing here?"

"Well, of course I had to greet you," he meowed softly, beginning to pace back and forth from the other side of the border, but keeping his gaze on me. "I'm just so excited to see that you've come here so soon..."

Another wave of grief and anger hit me at those words, and I couldn't suppress a hiss. "No! That's not what's happening!" I barked

back at Ashfur. "I can't be dead. I have a family and a Clan to protect."

Ashfur purred with amusement. "Oh, Lilypetal, do you realize how delusional you sound?" he meowed, his narrowed eyes glittering with humor. "I see you over there - you're in StarClan; you're *dead*. Probably a good thing too."

At Ashfur's words, I almost felt like I didn't have the strength to stand anymore. I had been trying to push away these thoughts the whole time I had been here, but what if he was right? *Did I really die from my kitting?* I wondered in disbelief. *That's it? I'll never return to ThunderClan? To my kits? Thornclaw? Goldenshine? Oh my StarClan, no...*

It was too much to bear, so much so that I didn't even think about the fact that showing so much vulnerability to Ashfur was probably exactly what he wanted to see. "No..." I breathed, screwing my eyes shut as they began to well up with emotion. *This pain hurts more than any I experienced during my kitting by far...*

I could hear Ashfur's sinister chuckle. "It's *awful*, isn't it?" he hissed mockingly. "You probably had so many plans when you were alive, huh? So many things that you wanted to accomplish."

I opened my eyes again to see the gray tom lift a paw and slash unsheathed claws through a thorn bush. Now, his blue eyes were blazing. "But something out of your control takes it away from you!" he growled, his voice full of rage. I then had to keep myself from taking a step back as I met his gaze again. "How does it feel?"

Ashfur then took another step, now as close to the StarClan border as he could be. His eyes were glittering sinisterly once again as he meowed, "Now that you're dead, you'll be helpless to be able to help anyone in your family, in ThunderClan, ever again. No more... *overthrowing* those that you don't trust, chasing them out of your territory, being ThunderClan's little spirit protector..."

I let out a small hiss as I dug my claws into the soft earth. Ashfur's words were supposed to make me more upset, but that's not what he was doing. Not at all.

I took a deep breath, stood up and straightened my posture, and then met Ashfur's gaze once again. "Yes, some day, that will be the case," I meowed clearly, shaking my head slowly. "But it's not now."

I then took a step forward, so close to Ashfur that we were practically nose to nose. "I am *going* to return to ThunderClan, and I'm going to make sure that you never feel even a twinge of triumph ever again. I may not be the biggest and toughest cat, but as long as I am here, you're not putting a *whisker* on any cat that I care about."

To my surprise, Ashfur's blue eyes flashed with alarm for just a moment, but almost instantly was replaced with his usual sickening ambition. "Oh, Lilypetal, it's adorable how naïve you are sometimes."

I let out a hiss through gritted teeth. "Call me adorable again, and you're going to lose your ability to talk," I muttered.

"Aw, well, it's too bad that we can't cross into each other's territories, isn't it?" Ashfur reminded me in a voice that made me want to shred him even more. "Anyway, what could you possibly do, even if you were to return? The Dark Forest is rising, I've tried to warn you before."

"Yeah, I really appreciated that," I meowed sarcastically as I rolled my eyes. I then shook my head quickly and let my gaze burn into Ashfur's. "I can't do much, but I'm going to do everything in my power."

Suddenly overwhelmed with persistence, I began stepping back, turning away from the Dark Forest warrior. "Whatever you all are planning back there, it doesn't matter. You're no match for the Clans," I called back. "Have fun play-fighting with each other back there."

Without waiting for any response from Ashfur, I broke into a run once again, not looking back even once.

As I ran, I raised my head in the air. "StarClan, somebody!" I yowled out. "Please! Bring me back, give me strength! I can't stay here! I must go back!"

No response.

I sighed with exasperation and stopped running. "Please!" I called out again, my voice breaking into a wail. "I have to see my kits. I have to protect them, my family, ThunderClan!"

More silence.

I let myself practically fall to the ground in helplessness. "Please!" I cried out one last time, my head falling to the ground. *This can't be happening...* I thought sadly. *Oh, my kits, Thornclaw, Goldenshine... I'm so sorry...*

I then shut my eyes, not knowing what I was accomplishing by doing that, but it made me feel slightly better. *Maybe I can pretend I'm resting out in the ThunderClan forest. I don't have to open my eyes and face this horrible reality.*

After several heartbeats, I gasped as a weird sensation rushed through my body. *What in the name of StarClan was that?*

My eyes then shot open as another one came, and I actually let out a startled yelp as I noticed that the trees that had once been around me were darker, looking as if they were beginning to fade away.

My eyes widened. *Am I...?*

I simply stood in complete bewilderment as my surroundings increasingly grew more nonexistent. And, finally, after one last weird sensation, everything went black.

Then, not even a heartbeat later, my eyes opened, and my ears immediately felt strained from the amount of racket that I heard.

At first, my vision was fuzzy. But, after simply blinking a few times, I was able to see clearly, and realize with complete happiness that I was back in the nursery. But now it looked as if a great deal of time had passed - at least half of a day, as I could just barely see the moon rising from the entrance of the den.

I closed my eyes again for just a moment. *I'm alive.*

I then tried to process my surroundings. I was still exhausted, and could barely lift my head, but I was able to do so just enough to see that Leafpool, Jayfeather, and Cinderheart (for whatever reason) were swarming the den. I could just barely see Goldenshine, with Dustystorm next to her, and Mistpelt sitting tail-lengths ahead, both of them pestering the medicine cats with questions.

But some other family members were missing, I realized. *Where is Thornclaw?* I wondered fearfully. *My kits?*

But after that thought, it didn't take me long to realize that a certain golden tabby's muzzle was pressed into my neck. I could hear his nearly silent pleading. "Lilypetal, please don't leave me..." he whispered, his voice cracking. "You are the strongest cat I know. I know you can do it. You must be here for me and our kits. Oh, I don't know what I'll do without you..."

A purr rumbling in my throat was the first verbal cue I was able to give to show that I was awake. "Great StarClan, Cloudtail was right," I breathed, trying to lift my head up once again and meet my mate's gaze. "Having a mate to worry about really has made you soft..."

As I finally was able to meet Thornclaw's pale blue gaze, I couldn't help but purr with amusement as I watched my mate's eyes nearly pop out of his head as they blazed with shock. He shot up from where he had been curled around me.

"Lilypetal!" he exclaimed. "Leafpool! Jayfeather! She's awake!"

I turned my head slightly to catch the relieved glow in Leafpool's amber eyes, as well as hear Goldenshine's and Mistpelt's excited squeals. "Oh, thank StarClan!" the former medicine cat breathed before lightly touching Jayfeather on the shoulder. "Run back to the medicine den and grab some strengthening herbs! We've got to get this new queen back on track."

Because I am *going to get back on track!*

My purrs became even louder as I then felt Thornclaw press his muzzle against my cheek as he purred as well. "You're back," he

breathed, and I closed my eyes in bliss as his warm scent flooded into my nose. "Oh my StarClan, you're back."

"That was the plan," I purred, licking my mate's cheek. *The thought of possibly never getting to see this tom again was unbearable, to say the least.* "Of course I'm back, my love. I was going to, if I could help it!"

"Oh, Lilypetal. The waiting was awful. I don't know what I would have done if you had died..." Thornclaw then pulled back so that I could meet his warm gaze. "Or... our kits."

I felt my heart beginning to grow as Thornclaw gestured to something on my other side. "Our kits will finally get to see their beautiful mother."

After staring back at Thornclaw for a few heartbeats, I slowly turned my head around. Then, my heart basically exploded as my eyes fell on the three little bundles curled up at my belly.

I was speechless, so incredibly overwhelmed with emotion. "Oh my goodness..." was all I could force out.

Thornclaw chuckled, then let his head rest on my flank as he looked down at our three kits. "Poppyfrost gave them milk after they were born," my mate whispered, "But it's almost like they knew that *you* were their mother. As soon as Leafpool placed them back in your nest, they snuggled up to you like they had done it many times before."

"Oh, Thornclaw," I breathed, not being able to take my eyes off of the kits. "They're so perfect."

"Aren't they?"

"There's two toms and a she-cat," Goldenshine purred, looking down at me warmly as she padded up to our nest. I then sniffed as I watched my daughter's tail lash with excitement. "Two brothers and a sister, oh my StarClan!"

After flashing Goldenshine an amused, warm gaze, I returned it to my three kits, finally getting to observe their appearances.

The first tom, the one who had apparently arrived first, was a brown tabby - the exact same color as my tabby pelt was where it wasn't white. He had a very strong build, and a face structure very similar to his father's. *So, quite the handsome little one!*

The second tom was jet-black except for his white paws and ear-tips. He was leaner, with longer legs. *But of course, he will be incredibly handsome as well!*

Then, there was the single she-cat, whose pelt looked exactly like mine, except for her tabby fur that was the golden brown of Thornclaw's. *A daughter that looks like me... and a son that has my brown tabby fur.*

I sighed, feeling as if I could stare down at this three for all of eternity. *Three perfect, strong kits*, I thought, truly feeling like I had never been so happy. *Welcome to ThunderClan, my precious little ones. I came back to protect you with everything in my power, and I am going to do just that.*

Chapter 17

[image]

Swiftpaw's POV

If there's anything Ashfur hasn't *made me do...* I thought as I paced back and forth around the shadowy clearing. *It would be to wait.*

Tonight, I had woken up in the Dark Forest as I usually did. But to my surprise, my Dark Forest mentor hadn't been sitting before me, anticipating my arrival as he did before every one of our sessions.

The only other time I had ever not come face-to-face with Ashfur when I opened my eyes was the night I had discovered that the gray-speckled tom's intentions for me went far beyond taking me on as an apprentice.

So, the fact that I am alone once again can't be good at all, I thought nervously. *Do I wait for him this time, or try and look for the mangy furball?*

I easily answered my own question. *Stay put, you mouse-brain.*

So, I continued to sit in complete silence for many, many... *many* heartbeats. Ashfur still wasn't showing even a whisker. *That'd be nice,* I couldn't help but think. *Maybe tonight Ashfur won't show up at all, and I'll wake up scratch-free for once.*

"Surprise."

I nearly jumped at the voice that meowed from behind me. Out of instinct, I hissed and practically leaped around to face the cat approaching me, my fur bristling and claws unsheathed. But I almost immediately relaxed as I met Ashfur's humored blue gaze.

Not that Ashfur is necessarily a calming sight... I thought as I rose to my paws. *But he's a familiar one.*

I heard Ashfur grunt as I scratched at my ear, his blue gaze burning

into me. "You were ready to face a cat that was sneaking up on you. Very nice," the tom murmured, licking a paw and running it over one of his ears. "And lucky, too. If you had waited for even just a heartbeat more, I could have easily taken you to the ground and given you a killing bite."

I suppressed a gasp, pausing the quick grooming I had been doing. Had that been a threat? I straightened up, trying to keep my tail from twitching anxiously as stared back at Ashfur's unreadable gaze. *Ah, those blue eyes that are indecipherable in the worst of moments...*

Even if what Ashfur said had been a joke, I knew very well by now that I couldn't take any sort of teasing remark like that lightly. Not when I had overheard the fox-heart saying that possibly *killing* me was part of his plan.

But Ashfur couldn't know that this was my thought process, obviously. There was no way that he could see my fear without him either thinking that I was a frightened little kit, or growing suspicious of something.

So, I simply laughed off Ashfur's words, flashing my mentor an amused but determined look. "That's not luck. It was skill," I murmured, trying to lighten the mood. "Anyway, why was I here waiting here by myself in the first place?"

To my surprise, Ashfur chuckled, lashing his tail as his eyes seemed to gleam with satisfaction. "Oh, I just had some business to take care of," he purred. "No need to worry."

Are you kidding? You telling me not to worry is probably a cause for worry.

I narrowed my eyes, growing increasingly anxious as I observed how happy Ashfur suddenly seemed. "May I ask what kind of business?"

I then had to keep my fur from bristling up in alarm as Ashfur's gaze darkened, his happiness fading as if a cat had physically wiped it off of his face, and a growl was rising in his throat as he padded

up closer to me. "Maybe I'll tell you after I've given you a few scratches to think about."

I unsheathed my claws, digging them into the ground so that I would stay in place. *Show no fear, show no fear...* "No need, Ashfur," I tried to meow evenly as I let my fur lie flat. "Forget what I said."

To my relief, the gray-speckled tom's gaze softened, and he simply let out a contemptuous grunt.

I straightened up once again, and I flicked my ears in surprise as I realized that recently, I hadn't had to look up to address my Dark Forest mentor anymore. And my muscular figure was almost mirroring his.

We're nearly the same height now, too, I thought to myself. *Great StarClan, when I first began training here I was barely a kit! But now... maybe I could win in a fight with him if I had to...*

I realized that Ashfur seemed to be thinking something similar, as he backed up, then looked at me up and down. "You're looking older," he murmured, nodding his head slowly. "Bigger, stronger. How long have you been an apprentice?"

"About four moons now," I answered, almost feeling shocked by my own answer. *I'll be a warrior in just a couple of moons. Maybe before that, if this Dark Forest training continues to put me at an advantage.*

And it had been, as usual. I honestly didn't think that I'd had one training session so far that had been even somewhat difficult for me. Both Foxleap and Dustystorm were brilliant mentors. At least, they would be for a cat that had no idea what they were doing.

Ashfur had actually been training me well. I was confident that I could leap into any battle, ready to face any fighter - apprentice or warrior. I'd be able to use both strength and wit to show them who's boss.

But obviously, it had never been all fun and games, if that wasn't clear already. Ashfur, his threats, and him hovering over me constantly made me second-guess everything I did, even everything

that I *said*.

Every moment in the Dark Forest was like walking on ice, or balancing on a thin log crossing a river below. One little slip-up, and you could plummet into the cold, merciless water, never to see the surface again.

I hadn't managed to crack the ice or lose my balance yet, thank StarClan. I had fallen into a rhythm - training as I needed to, obeying Ashfur's every word, and not treading my paws where they didn't belong. *It's not ideal, but it's keeping me alive...*

"Four moons," Ashfur muttered in response to me. I then nodded slowly, expecting the tom to say more, but he simply stared back at me for several heartbeats.

I shifted my paws back and forth uncomfortably. *The concept of "four moons" isn't really that difficult to figure out, is it?* I thought sarcastically. "Yeah, four moons," I nearly whispered, desperate to break off this torturous, awkward moment.

I then raised my eyebrows in surprise as Ashfur began to pace about. "And what a successful four moons they have been," he meowed in a creepily warm voice.

I screwed my eyes shut. *Oh, no. Not one of these really weird positive affirmation sessions again.*

But as uneasy as I felt, I waited for Ashfur to go on. "And I don't necessarily mean in your training," the tom continued, pausing in his pacing to sit in a different spot a few tail-lengths from me. "You haven't let kin, friends, or your Clanmates keep you away from what's most important."

I tried to ignore the intense pang of guilt that I felt. *Unfortunately, that's correct.* "Right..." was I managed to say. *I drift away from Foxleap, Snowpaw, Goldenshine... everyone, a little more each day.*

"Right, of course! You don't need any of those cowards," Ashfur exclaimed, lashing his tail. He then snorted, rolling his eyes. "It must be embarrassing to have kin that sets such a horrible example

for you..."

I narrowed my eyes and tilted my head, wondering who Ashfur was referring to. *Maybe Thornclaw...?*

It would make sense. Just a couple of moons ago, the golden tabby warrior had *willfully* left the Dark Forest.

The night that it happened, he had begun training as he usually did, but any cat could have noticed how preoccupied and distant he was in the sessions. He may as well have not even been there. *Which I guess was what he had in mind...*

My heart had immediately begun to beat faster as I had watched the cat I knew as my mother's father approach Tigerstar, not showing a single twinge of regret or fear of what he was doing.

I had been impressed to watch the confrontation between Tigerstar and the ThunderClan warrior.

Petrified too, but incredibly impressed.

After all, the last time that Thornclaw had tried to defy against any Dark Forest cat, he had nearly gotten shredded to death by Ashfur. But this time, he had looked determined, *challenging* - like he would fight any amount of cats he needed to in order to get his way.

He had blatantly confessed to Tigerstar that he was leaving the Dark Forest, much to the Dark Forest warrior's shock and dismay.

"Listen, Tigerstar," Thornclaw had growled through gritted teeth, responding to the dark brown tabby's initial threatening words. "My nights training here are over. They should have been a long time ago."

He then sighed, letting his gaze linger to the ground. "Why I ever thought it would be a good idea to train with the cat that I watched try to take over the forest, killing whomever he had to in the process, I don't know," he muttered, his pale blue eyes full of shame. Then, the tabby tom's eyes darkened as he looked back up at Tigerstar. "What I do know, is that I don't want to be here anymore."

I had nearly taken a step back as Tigerstar growled, slashing an unsheathed paw across Thornclaw's face. "Traitor!" he roared back at my kin.

Thornclaw simply shook out his fur, then sighing as he let his gaze flit around the clearing. I had tensed up as our gazes had locked.

I then began twitching my tail uncomfortably as Thornclaw's eyes rested on me for many heartbeats, glowing with such intensity that it sent a chill down my spine. I almost wondered if my mind was playing tricks on me as I thought I saw *pleading* in the golden tabby's eyes. *Does he want me to follow him?*

Just when I thought I couldn't bear to look back at him any longer, he returned his gaze to Tigerstar. "Traitor, maybe," he murmured, clearly trying to keep his temper. "But what of it? What do you have to gain if I stay?"

Thornclaw's eyes narrowed as he took a step closer to Tigerstar. "Do you want to be wasting your time training a traitor? Someone who doesn't want to be here in the first place?" he pressed, slowly unsheathing his claws and sinking them into the dry earth.

Those questions seemed to bring Tigerstar at a loss for words, as he simply stared back at Thornclaw, his eyes flaming amber slits.

Thornclaw then let out a satisfied grunt before giving the Dark Forest warrior a curt nod. "I thought not," he meowed, then taking a few steps back and slowly but surely padding off into the forest.

For many heartbeats, Thornclaw's pawsteps were still as loud as a cat's yowl as the clearing of Dark Forest warriors and their trainees fell completely silent.

I exchanged a shocked glance with Blossomfall, whose blue eyes were wide with bewilderment. Mousewhisker, who was on my other side, had been shifting uncomfortably as he stared at the ground.

"Coward!" Ashfur called out into the forest, breaking the silence. As cats then began to whisper to each other uncomfortably, Ashfur let

out a hiss, whipping himself around to face me once again.

"Come on, you three," he then meowed sharply, nodding to me, Blossomfall and Mousewhisker. "I'll teach you some moves that show you why it's worth staying here."

I had simply given my Dark Forest mentor a small nod as I began to follow him to our training spot. Ashfur had fallen into step with me, his head shaking slowly.

"How could *you* possibly be related to such a mouse-heart?" he had muttered into my ear.

How could you possibly be related to such a mouse-heart?

Ashfur's words echoed again in my mind as I looked back on Thornclaw's withdrawal. *I don't know. It was pretty brave, if you ask me,* I reflected. *And Ivypool being a spy too... Great StarClan, I can't get over how brave she is. Basically any action of defiance against the Dark Forest is incredible to me... could I do the same thing?*

I then let out a quiet snort, shaking my head quickly. *No chance. I couldn't be a spy, so attempting to leave the Dark Forest would be even worse.*

I then pulled myself out my thoughts as Ashfur stood up, clearing his throat. "Anyway, let's get started, Swiftpaw," he meowed, shaking out his fur.

"Sure thing," I replied. *And StarClan forbid I rub your fur the wrong way.* "Let's-"

I then cut myself off as I noticed a flash of movement out of the corner of my eye. "Let's..." I repeated mindlessly, my fur beginning to bristle.

Suddenly feeling the overwhelming feeling of being watched, I quickly whipped my head in the direction that I had seen the movement.

I then had to suppress a gasp as I just barely caught a white figure slithering through the shadows. A cat, definitely, but no Dark Forest

cat that I had ever seen.

But unfortunately, I couldn't ever get a good enough look at the figure to decipher *who* it could have been. It rapidly ran off into the shadows, almost as if it knew it had been spotted.

I stared off at where it, he or she, had vanished, letting out a confused grunt. *Was I just imagining that?* I wondered, feeling utterly baffled. *Who... or* what *was that?*

"Swiftpaw!" Ashfur suddenly barked, causing me to jump so high that I was sure I could have grabbed onto a tree branch. "What happened to getting started, you daft furball?"

Foxdung. So much for not rubbing your fur the wrong way. "Sorry," I murmured, trying to push away any thoughts of the mysterious cat I had seen for the time being. "I'm ready now."

Chapter 18

[image]

Goldenshine's POV

I sighed with relief, the familiar bright blue flowers of borage catching my eye as I traveled through the forest.

There it is. Thank goodness! I trotted excitedly over to the clump of herbs and began to collect as much as I could, now eager to return to camp as soon as possible now that I had found what I was looking for. *And keeping a medicine cat like Jayfeather waiting certainly won't do me any favors!* I realized, purring to myself. *Anyways, I wouldn't want to deprive my new brothers and sister of any milk!*

It had now been about a full-day since Lilypetal had given birth to her kits, yet I was still as shaken as I would be if it had *just* happened. Watching my mother suffer so much and seeing her life nearly be stolen from her was as terrifying as any battle. And seeing that even Leafpool, although deprived of her roles now but a brilliant medicine cat, seemed nervous as well, made me feel almost sure that I was going to lose my mother that night. *And not to mention, seeing a birth go so wrong only worsens my want to not have kits of my own...*

As if it couldn't get any worse, when Leafpool had stated that Lilypetal wasn't breathing and that she barely had a heartbeat, all I had done was try to hold back my whimpers as I dug my head into Dustystorm's fur.

So, to say the least, getting to see the hazel orbs of Lilypetal's eyes once again gave me the biggest sense of ease I'd ever felt.

And now my mother was awake and feeling well, but extremely tired. Jayfeather was constantly having to keep her strength up, as well as make sure that she had enough to provide for her and Thornclaw's new kits. So, I had committed to helping him in

whatever way I could, for as long as he needed me.

I was now on my third mission of the day - Lilypetal had been pretty low on milk for the kits, so Jayfeather had asked me to run out to the forest and get some borage.

Thank StarClan that I still have a mother that I can get this borage for, I thought grimly as I pushed all of the borage I had collected into one pile. I then let out another sigh before clamping all of it in my jaws. *I'll become a medicine cat if it means that I'll be apart of what helps Lilypetal to feel better.*

Now feeling a rush of determination, I broke into a run, my jaws tightening around the clump I was carrying. I nearly slipped on the snow beneath me several times from how quickly I was going.

But luckily, I made it back to camp without any delay and burst into the medicine den. I murmured greeting to Jayfeather and Leafpool through my full mouth before putting the clump down. "Here's the borage you asked for," I meowed kindly, nodding my head to the pile. "I hope it's enough!"

Jayfeather was the first to turn around from the stocks of herbs, giving me a small nod of gratitude as he bent down to pick up the borage. "Sure, I guess," he muttered as he padded past me, leaving the medicine den. "Thanks."

"Goodness, Jayfeather, you're overwhelming me with gratitude. Tone it down," I teased to the medicine cat before turning back towards Leafpool. "Is there anything else you'd like me to do, Leafpool?"

Leafpool let out an amused purr and turned around to face me. "No need, Goldenshine. You've done so much today - take a rest," the former medicine cat purred gratefully. I then watched as the light brown tabby she-cat tilted her head and looked to the side, as if she was pondering something. "If you don't mind though, when you leave, could you send Cinderheart here? I'm going to help Jayfeather with Lilypetal in the nursery, and I'd like to have her finish organizing these herbs for me after I give her some direction."

Cinderheart? Again? I thought in bewilderment. Leafpool had asked for the gray tabby she-cat many times now, whether it be to help her assist with minor injuries, organize herbs in the medicine den, *she even called Cinderheart in to help while Lilypetal was having her kits! Out of all cats, why her?*

As weird as it all was, I pushed away my confusion for the time being and gave Leafpool a definitive nod. "Sure thing," I replied, then lashing my tail in farewell and leaving the den.

Once I was out in the open, I immediately began looking for Cinderheart. Luckily, she was just over by the Highledge, speaking with Lionblaze. I hated to interrupt whatever they were discussing, but I also didn't want to keep Leafpool waiting. So, with a hesitant flick of my ears, I padded up to the two cats and gave them a nod in greeting.

"Sorry to intrude," I meowed awkwardly, averting my gaze to Cinderheart, "But Cinderheart, Leafpool asked for your help in the medicine den."

To my surprise, Cinderheart's eyes flashed with frustration and worry as I spoke. But before I could question it, the warrior shook her head quickly and gave me a slow nod. She then exchanged an exasperated glance with Lionblaze before brushing past me and padding over to the medicine den.

I watched the she-cat go for a few heartbeats, then turning back to look at Lionblaze. "She's never shown interest in being a medicine cat before," I commented to the tabby tom, my eyes narrowing. "Do you know what all of this is about?"

Lionblaze sighed as he shrugged. "I couldn't tell you," he muttered. "I've asked Jayfeather about it, but he's not telling me *anything*."

I gave Lionblaze a sympathetic tap on the shoulder with my tail, knowing very well that he and Cinderheart had begun to spark a connection moons ago. If Cinderheart actually was to become a medicine cat, surely they would never become mates in the future. "Very strange," I murmured, then nodding to Lionblaze in farewell. "I've been helping out Jayfeather in the medicine den - if I find out

anything, I will be sure to tell you."

"It would be appreciated."

Hopefully there's something to tell, I though as I flashed the tom another empathetic glance. *Because I am going to attempt to ask Jayfeather about it. I've got something that Lionblaze lacks - assertion.*

I then began to trot over to the nursery, eager to check on Lilypetal and my newest siblings. But before I could even make it in, I let out a startled yelp as I nearly crashed into the gray tabby pelt of Jayfeather. *Shoot!*

"Geez!" The medicine cat hissed as he jumped back. "Watch where you're going!"

I then tried to suppress a purr of amusement as Jayfeather made his way past me. "Sometimes I think that you might as well be blind like me," he muttered, shaking his head slowly. "One of the clumsiest cats..."

Just as the tom's voice was beginning to fade off, I gasped and flicked my ears, then quickly followed behind Jayfeather. "Wait!" I called to him. "What are you doing right now?"

Jayfeather didn't stop as he answered me. "I'm getting some chamomile for Lilypetal," he meowed, crawling into the medicine den. "Her spirits are up, but her strength is not."

I followed just behind him. "Very good way of putting it," I conceded before padding up so that my fur brushed Jayfeather's. "After you're done with that, do you have a moment to talk?" Not only did I want to ask Jayfeather about Cinderheart, but we had a lot, and I mean *a lot*, of unfinished business. *He had been just about to tell me the deal about Swiftpaw and Snowpaw! I can barely stand the anticipation. Lilypetal's kitting was the worst kind of distraction, but now it's constantly on my mind!*

Jayfeather raised his tail as a signal for me to wait, and then quickly made his way over to the piles of herbs in the medicine den. He nodded acknowledgement to where Cinderheart was now

working, then sniffed through all of the herbs and picked some up. Just as I thought he was going to walk past me without giving me an answer, he paused briefly and hissed into my ear, "You know that small clearing near the Highledge? Wait for me there."

"Gotcha," I whispered back, following Jayfeather out of the medicine den and then making my way to the agreed meeting spot. To be honest, I was surprised that the stubborn medicine cat had agreed to meet me without question. Typically, a few annoyed questions would come before receiving any sort of answer. *He probably knows by now that I never take "no" for an answer,* I joked to myself.

Luckily, I only felt as I had been waiting for a few heartbeats before Jayfeather's gray tabby pelt emerged through the bushes. I settled down as I watched him shake out his fur and sit down as well.

"This had better be important considering you pulled me away from caring for your *own mother* to talk to me," Jayfeather murmured, lashing his tail with irritation.

I stood up again and gasped. "Of *course* it's important!" I exclaimed. "Do you not remember what we were discussing yesterday? There was so much to decipher, and you had told me that you'd maybe managed to decipher it; the dreams, Snowpaw, Swiftpaw..."

I then shook my head quickly, trying to keep myself calm as I sat back down. "There's even something else that I need to ask you about..." I admitted, worried about throwing something else to worry about at the medicine cat. "Cinderheart. What's her deal?"

For just a moment, Jayfeather looked perplexed. "Cinderheart?" He repeated.

I simply gave the tom a grunt for an answer.

It was then that I was sure Jayfeather knew what I meant. I was worried for a moment that he would go berserk as I watched his eyes narrow into two blue slits at an incredibly slow pace. "Well..." he began. "She's a ThunderClan warrior. Her parents are Brackenfur and Sorreltail. Her sister is Poppyfrost. She was Ivypool's mentor.

That's her deal."

"All true," I muttered, growing increasingly more suspicious, "but surely those are things that I could figure out on my own?"

"You asked."

"And clearly that's not what I meant," I insisted, pushing down my frustration. "Jayfeather, I know that *you* know what I mean. She's basically serving as a third medicine cat at this point."

I then began to pace back and forth as I went on. "I've never heard her utter one thing about wanting to be one," I meowed. "In fact, when I sent her to Leafpool's den, she sure didn't look excited for the mission I had given her. What's going on?" I then stopped pacing and sat back down, anticipating Jayfeather's answer.

The gray tabby medicine cat hesitated for several heartbeats, only furthering my suspicion - clearly there was something about Cinderheart that I didn't know, and maybe it was something that I couldn't know. Nevertheless, if Jayfeather was going to give me an answer - I was going to take it.

My ears pricked with alertness as Jayfeather finally begin to speak, his gaze full of wariness. "Well... a lot, to be honest," the tom murmured. "Listen, you know how I was sure that Snowflight was reincarnated in Snowpaw from the very beginning?"

What in the name of StarClan does this have to do with Snowflight? "Definitely," I answered. "But I thought that was because you are a medicine cat. You just... *know* that stuff."

"Well, sure," Jayfeather agreed. "But that's not the only reason why..."

I raised my eyebrows and tilted my head with intrigue, waiting for Jayfeather to go on.

"I was pretty sure that Snowflight was reincarnated... because Cinderpelt was too. In Cinderheart."

My eyes widened, and I felt as if my mouth had fallen off.

"Cinderpelt? The ThunderClan medicine cat?" After Jayfeather simply gave me a nod, I processed his words for many heartbeats. Finally, I breathed, "Wow..."

I then shook my head quickly to bring myself into focus. "So there are two reincarnated medicine cats in this Clan?" I questioned. "StarClan thought that both of them should return to ThunderClan?"

Jayfeather shrugged. "Apparently," he replied. "I guess they felt that they both had unfinished business."

"And Cinderheart's has to do with her being a medicine cat?"

Jayfeather snorted as he shook his head. "Honestly, Leafpool and I aren't too sure," he murmured exasperatedly. "We wonder if her becoming a medicine cat again is all there is to it."

I nodded, processing Jayfeather words for a few moments before speaking again. "But what about Snowflight?" I meowed gravely, narrowing my eyes. I knew that Snowpaw possessed medicine cat skills just as Cinderheart apparently did, but was that all to Snowflight's return? Was StarClan just going to start bringing all medicine cats back for the shake of fulfilling unfinished business?

By Jayfeather's look, though, it seemed a lot more complicated than that.

I took a step closer to the medicine cat. "What is it that you were going to tell me yesterday?" I pressed.

Jayfeather sighed, then met my gaze as if he could see. "I think that the dreams you and I have had are trying to tell us Snowflight's destiny."

"Her destiny?" I repeated. "You mean, the reason why she has returned?"

"Exactly," Jayfeather answered. "I think that she's-"

I nearly let out a frustrated growl as Jayfeather cut himself off. "She's what?!" I urged, almost wanting to jump up and down out of anxiety. "And you had mentioned that Swiftpaw was involved too!

What's-"

"I'm never going to be able to tell you if you keep meowing on!" Jayfeather snapped. "Let me get my thoughts together!"

Whoops. The medicine cat simply watched in frustration as I took a deep breath and sat down again. *Okay, Goldenshine. For once, please shut up.* "Okay, proceed."

I simply sat as Jayfeather sighed, closing his eyes for many heartbeats before finally opening them again. To my surprise, the tom's blind blue eyes were filled with uncertainty and... *sympathy?*

"Goldenshine," Jayfeather meowed softly. "I think that Snowflight has returned to stop Ashfur."

"*Stop* him?" I repeated to Jayfeather, feeling overwhelmed with bewilderment. "Stop him in what way? He's dead!"

Jayfeather snorted. "Being dead has nothing on him," the medicine cat muttered. "It really doesn't for any cat."

Well, sure. But... "That may be so," I murmured, thinking out loud. "But why would StarClan bring her back to overthrow only one of them?" *Especially when Ashfur was the one that killed her,* I realized. *Was Snowflight brought back to avenge herself?*

To my confusion, Jayfeather didn't seem to want to answer that. His eyes flashed as if a cat had just asked him to jump off a cliff and see what happened. And then, it looked as if he was trying to decide between jumping off a cliff or leaping into a fire.

"Well, maybe I don't know as much as I thought I did..." my friend stammered. Then, to my complete bewilderment, Jayfeather brushed past me and began padding away. "I might as well not tell you something that I'm not completely sure of."

"Hey!" I called back to him. "What happened to saying, 'it all makes sense now'? Jayfeather!" *What in the name of StarClan?*

"I've already been away for too long, you mouse-brain!" He replied, speaking in his normal tone once again. "I'll tell you some other

time."

"That's too long to wait!" I insisted, desperate to find out what Jayfeather had wanted to say. "Jayfeather, come on!"

But clearly, that wasn't going to happen now, and Jayfeather was the *last* cat that I wanted to try and probe. *But... why did he storm out so suddenly?* I wondered. *Did he just not want to tell me? Why?*

As I watched Jayfeather walk off without another word, I reluctantly decided that I would just have to wait for when he actually *did* want to. *There's no one else that I can get this information from, and I don't want to risk never getting it by pressuring him into it,* I rationalized. *But Great StarClan, do I want to get it so badly! Is wanting to know why your sister died and returned so much to ask? And what about Ashfur? I killed the fox-heart, what else could he possibly do?*

I let out a frustrated sigh as I began padding towards the nursery, where I had just watched Jayfeather's tail disappear inside. I decided that I would check on my family to try and get my mind off of this. I needed a distraction now more than anything.

I quickly trotted over to the den and crawled inside just behind the medicine cat, and I felt a purr rumbling in my throat and my worries already beginning to fly away as my eyes fell on the nest nearest to the nursery entrance.

Lilypetal was lying in her nest staring down at her three new kits, who were currently suckling at her belly. Her hazel eyes looked extremely tired, but were blaring with overwhelming love for the three bundles. She hadn't had enough strength to leave her nest since the kitting, but I could probably speak for her when I said that she wouldn't even want to.

My gaze then fell to the three little bundles at Lilypetal's belly. It was still so surreal to me that these three were my siblings - my two brothers and a sister. *I directly share blood with these three kits... oh, I can't wait to get to know them! To play with them!*

I then had to suppress a purr of amusement as I looked up at my

father, who had himself curled around Lilypetal as he also looked down at the kits. Thornclaw had been pretty much plastered to my mother since her kitting, and it didn't look like he was planning on letting her out of his sight any time soon. I mean, I could completely understand. *He nearly lost her. I'm sure if I witnessed Dustystorm nearly be taken away from me, I'd want to make sure it never happened again if I could help it!*

"Hi!" I purred as I approached my parents and the kits. I then nodded to Lilypetal, my eyes filled with concern. "How are you doing?"

A purr was rumbling in Lilypetal's throat as she weakly lifted her head and touched her nose to mine. "Hello there," she breathed, still sounding absolutely exhausted. "I am wonderful. *Tired*..." I then purred with amusement as her gaze flicked to the three kits, then glancing to look at Thornclaw for a heartbeat before returning her gaze to me. "But absolutely wonderful."

My gaze then flicked back to Thornclaw as I heard him snort. "Don't let it get to your head," he teased, touching his nose to Lilypetal's ear. "As long as you're showing any signs of weakness, I'm keeping you right here."

Lilypetal purred as she exchanged an amused glance with her mate. "Your father won't even let me see daylight," Lilypetal meowed, shaking her head slowly as she looked back at me. "How awful is he?"

"The *worst*," I purred. And as Thornclaw sniffed and rolled his eyes, I mrrowed with laughter and sat in front of the nest, looking down at the kits. "Have you decided on names for them yet? I remember you named Snowflight and me right after we were born."

"We decided that we're going to wait until they open their eyes," Lilypetal replied, her eyes staring lovingly down at the kits once again. "Any day now..."

"Oh, I can't wait!" I squealed, my tail flicking back and forth excitedly."Anyway, are you all hungry? I will gladly get something for you all to share."

Almost on cue, I actually thought I heard the rumbles and gurgles of some cat's stomach. I narrowed my eyes as my mouth spread out into a smirk. "I think that's a yes," I murmured, trying to suppress a purr of amusement.

I then watched as Lilypetal's gaze reflected mine, and her head slowly turned to look back at Thornclaw. My father's gaze radiated embarrassment, but his eyes glittered with humor. "Well, I don't know about that..." he muttered.

"Hm, right," Lilypetal purred before turning back to me. "That is *definitely* a yes. Thank you, Goldenshine."

"Sure!" I replied, already turning around to leave the den. "I'll be right back!"

Excited to have something new to do, I quickly left the den and began trotting across the clearing, trying to decide what type of prey my parents might be in the mood for. *Mouse is Lilypetal's favorite... but surely that won't be filling enough? Thornclaw likes shrew... maybe that'd be a good thing for them to share!*

But once I got to the fresh-kill pile, I couldn't help but let out a startled gasp as I recognized the gray-black pelt of Swiftpaw already sniffing through the clump of animals.

And unfortunately, my gasp had caught his attention. I almost wanted to take a step back as my son turned around, and his deep blue gaze locked with mine.

I had *no* idea what to say to him.

And it appeared as if Swiftpaw didn't either, as he turned away from me as quickly as he had looked at me. Clearly, he was leaving with the sole purpose of wanting to avoid me - I mean, he had been looking for a piece of prey and was leaving with nothing.

And I wasn't going to let that slide. I couldn't take this anymore.

"Oh, nuh-uh. No you don't," I hissed, leaping forward to intercept Swiftpaw.

Swiftpaw's eyes flashed with infuriation. "What are you doing?" Swiftpaw hissed back as he began to prod me with one of his paws. "Get out of my way!"

"Mm, sorry. Can't do that," I murmured, my eyes narrowing. "In case you've forgotten - sons typically speak to their mothers."

As Swiftpaw tried to swerve his way around me, I jumped forward to stop him once again. "That's something that you've failed to do for *three moons* now!" I growled to my son. "After spending six moons with me in the nursery, did you suddenly decide that I'm *repulsive?*"

Swiftpaw let out an annoyed huff and rolled his eyes. "Sure, yeah. You're disgusting," he muttered sarcastically. "Can you *please* let me go?"

"Not until you tell me what in the name of StarClan is going on with you!" I insisted, stepping in front of Swiftpaw once again. As much as I didn't want them to, my next words fell into a whimper. "Do you have any idea how much you've been hurting me? How much it stings to have a son that doesn't give a mouse's squeak about me?" *And without any reason too!*

Swiftpaw said nothing, and only returned my gaze with a hard stare.

"Did you lose your heart somewhere out in the forest when you first became an apprentice?" I pressed as I suddenly began to shake. "*What* is *wrong*?"

"For the last time, get out of my way, Goldenshine," Swiftpaw meowed sharply, and I wondered if I had imagined the shake I had heard in his voice.

"No!" I barked back.

"For StarClan's sake!"

I then let out a pained hiss as I felt claws rake across my flank for just a heartbeat, and I winced back in pain as Swiftpaw made his way past me without another word.

My heart was pounding as I straightened myself up again, not being able to process the fact that my own son had just tried to inflict a wound on his mother. He hadn't drawn blood, but with the amount of pain he had caused in my heart, he might as well have. *What has our relationship come to? What has Swiftpaw come to?*

As I watched Swiftpaw storm off into the forest, I could see Dustystorm approaching out of the corner of my eye. "Goldenshine?" He meowed worriedly as he arrived at my side. "Where is Swiftpaw going in such a fit?"

I shook my head slowly as my son's gray-black tail finally disappeared through the entrance. "Who knows?" I muttered before letting out a hissed and whipping myself around. "Who cares?"

Dustystorm stared at me, his blue eyes wide with bewilderment. "Aren't you going to go after him? Try and talk to your son?"

I suppressed a whimper as I turned to meet Dustystorm's gaze. "What's the point?" I growled, unsheathing my claws into the ground as I continued to bubble up with betrayal and rage. "He's no son of mine!"

Chapter 19

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

"Psst!"

A purr began rumbling in my throat as I recognized the soft hiss that had come from behind me. "Psst, mother!" the voice came again.

I exchanged an amused glance with Thornclaw, who was snuggled up close to me in our nest, before shifting slightly to face the little bundle of fur that was trying to get my attention. "Yes, Lightningkit?" I whispered.

I then watched, my heart beginning to swell, as the black pelt of my son appeared into my sight. His yellow eyes were wide and anxious as he kneaded his white paws into the ground. "Wrenkit sent me and Emberkit away so that we could hide, and he's going to try and find us!" Lightningkit whispered, whipping his head back and forth to see if his brother was near. "Can I hide in between you and father? Wrenkit would never find me there!"

I purred with amusement as I turned my head to look at Thornclaw once more. My eyes narrowed into slits as I gazed at my mate teasingly. "Can you handle not being stuck to my fur for a few moments?" I murmured, nuzzling Thornclaw's cheek affectionately.

Thornclaw's pale blue eyes glittered with humor and love as he nodded. "Well, sure!" he exclaimed. "We wouldn't want Lightningkit to be found, would we?" I continued to purr as he then shifted himself slightly in our nest, leaving a small space between us. He then nodded to the small gap we had created. "All yours, Lightningkit!"

I then returned my gaze to Lightningkit to see him letting out a small squeak of excitement. Then, without another word, he quickly

padded over with his little paws and wiggled his way in between Thornclaw and I.

The two of us exchanged another amused look as our son curled up into a little ball and nestled into our fur. *One of our kits using the both of us as a hiding spot*, I thought happily. *That's a new one.*

"Don't tell Wrenkit that I'm here!" Lightningkit whispered, blinking up at us. The little black bundle then gasped as a small rustle came from the nursery entrance. "Uh, oh. There he is!"

Sure enough, I looked up to see Wrenkit with his brown tabby pelt making his way into the nursery. He paused right at the entrance, his pale blue eyes narrowing down into slits as he scanned the den. He let out a small grunt before padding deeper inside and continuing to look around.

"Hi there, Wrenkit," Thornclaw purred, flicking his son's ear with his golden tabby tail. "What are you up to?"

Wrenkit sighed, shaking his head slowly before turning to face Thornclaw and me. "I'm looking for Lightningkit and Emberkit, but so far I'm having no-"

Suddenly, Wrenkit was cut off as a high-pitched sneeze came from Lightningkit's hiding spot.

I then tried to suppress another purr of amusement as Wrenkit's ears flicked, and his gaze shot to our nest. "What was that?" he muttered, his tabby tail lashing back and forth.

I could feel a tiny paw prodding my flank, and I looked down to see that Lightningkit was flashing me a desperate, warning look. I was practically trying to hold back a smile as I then returned to Wrenkit.

"Um... that was me!" I exclaimed to my son, scooting closer to Thornclaw so that Lightningkit would be more hidden. I then nudged Thornclaw with my shoulder as I heard him let out an amused, disbelieving snort. "Yes, definitely me. I sneezed."

Wrenkit clearly wasn't buying it. "Do she-cats sneeze from their stomach?" he mewed, his eyes narrowing once again as he trotted

even closer.

"Yeah, didn't you know?" I meowed, my voice full of laughter as I watched Wrenkit then climb onto my flank and peer over.

His eyes widened as he caught sight of Lightningkit in his hiding spot. "Ah-ha!" he yowled, then leaping down to land on top of his brother. "Found you!"

"Oh, whatever!" Lightningkit grunted as Wrenkit pinned him down in the moss. "I'll find a better place next time!"

"Better than in between the flanks of your parents?" Thornclaw purred, watching as his sons both stood up and pawed at each other. He then flashed me a loving look as he meowed, "I don't think so."

I returned the look to my mate, then letting my gaze follow Wrenkit and Lightningkit, who both made their exit by climbing over Thornclaw's flank.

"Okay, I found you first, so that means that you're going to look for Emberkit and me next time," Wrenkit meowed, his eyes glittering with satisfaction as he looked at his brother.

"Speaking of Emberkit, where is she?" Lightningkit murmured, his yellow eyes widening as he began to look around the nursery. "She's still hiding somewhere!"

I grunted with amusement, moving closer to Thornclaw in order to fill the space between us. I exchanged yet another humored glance with him as I thought, *knowing that determined, feisty little daughter of ours, they aren't going to find her for quite a while!*

And as I had expected, Wrenkit and Lightningkit spent many, many moments looking for their sister - scanning every piece of the nursery several times, and even going out into the camp clearing to ask around, but for a while, they had no luck.

In fact, it was taking so long that I myself was beginning to want to look for her. *No way in the name of StarClan am I letting a kit of mine go missing this early!* I thought, briefly reflecting on the time that the

kits of my first litter, Goldenshine and Snowflight, had managed to escape into ThunderClan territory through the dirtplace.

I sighed, trying to push down worry as I started to stand up, but was almost immediately halted when I felt Thornclaw's tail wrap itself around my back.

"Oh, no you don't," Thornclaw meowed as he gently pushed me back down in my nest. "I'll help them look for Emberkit. You're staying right here."

As stubborn as I *wanted* to be, and how much I wished I could refuse, I knew that I needed to listen to my mate. I was still terribly exhausted and weak from my kitting just a little over a quarter moon ago, so much so that any sudden movements would be risky.

So, I had to abide. I flashed Thornclaw a grateful look as I touched my nose with his, taking in his familiar scent. "Fine, fine," I breathed, then pulling away to meet my mate's gaze once again. I winked at him as I whispered, "Good luck."

Thornclaw licked my head, a purr rumbling in his throat. "We'll definitely need it!" he exclaimed, then turning and beginning to lead Wrenkit and Lightingkit out of the nursery. "Come on, you two!"

As I watched the three of the toms most dear to me disappear through the den entrance, I tried to ignore my tugging anxiety. I couldn't have been more sure that my youngest daughter was completely fine - she typically listened to her parents' directions, and the camp was so abundant with cats that it would be difficult for her to escape even if she wanted to - but I still couldn't help but go to the worst case scenario.

And now would be the absolute worst time for any cat, let alone a kit, to go missing! I thought worriedly. *We're only just approaching the heart of leaf-bare!*

It had only been just heartbeats since Thornclaw, Lightningkit and Wrenkit had left the nursery, but I flicked my ears, growing extremely alert as I heard eruptions of laughter come from out in

the camp.

Then, just heartbeats after *that*, I gasped as Thornclaw's head appeared back in the nursery, and Emberkit was dangling in his jaws.

"Emberkit! Thank StarClan!" I purred, watching as Thornclaw made his way back in, Wrenkit and Lightningkit right behind him.

Thornclaw was shaking his head slowly, his pale blue eyes glittering with amusement as he set Emberkit down in front of me. "I didn't know that a hunting patrol had managed to catch an Emberkit! That's one of the rarest catches out there!" Thornclaw purred as he looked down at his daughter.

I glanced back at my mate as I began to grow very confused. "What in the name of StarClan are you talking about?" I asked, bending my head forward to touch my nose to Emberkit's golden tabby-and-white flank.

Thornclaw sniffed, flicking one of Emberkit's ears with his tail. "We found this little master hider in the fresh-kill pile!" Thornclaw replied, his voice full of laughter.

Emberkit hiding in a place as outrageous as the fresh-kill pile. Why does that not surprise me at all? I thought as Thornclaw continued, "You're lucky no cat came up to get a piece of prey while you were in there. You would've scared them out of their fur!"

"Oh, come on!" Emberkit mewed, batting at Thornclaw's tail with her forepaws. She then let out a quiet purr as she turned to meet my gaze, her hazel eyes glittering with amusement and satisfaction. "You've got to admit, I picked a really great spot!"

"You definitely did, my dear. I'm very proud of you," I purred, licking Emberkit on her small head. I then flicked my tail towards Wrenkit and Lightningkit, their demeanors exuberating contempt. "It took these two forever to find you!"

For just a moment, Emberkit's eyes flashed with guilt as she turned to face her brothers. "I'll try to pick an easier place next time!" she

meowed kindly, then nodding to Lightningkit. "Now come on, it's your turn to find me and Wrenkit!"

Just like that, Wrenkit's and Lightningkit's annoyance seemed to go away at the prospect of more playing. The both of them nodded eagerly before dispersing, Lightningkit padding over to the corner to wait while Emberkit and Wrenkit quickly tried to find a new place to hide.

I let out a satisfied sigh, my heart welling up with so much love as I dug my head into Thornclaw's fur. "Great StarClan, I'm so happy," I whispered, shifting my head slightly so I could observe my kits' game of hide and seek. "They're all so extraordinary, aren't they?"

"I couldn't agree more," Thornclaw purred, twinning his tail with mine. "And so are you, bringing them into this world despite how much your pain and weakness were trying to fight back."

I sniffed as I looked up to meet my mate's gaze. "I'm actually going to have to agree with you on that one," I meowed teasingly.

"Great StarClan," Thornclaw breathed, rolling his eyes as he looked down at me. His gaze then softened as he whispered, "I don't know what I would have done if I'd lost you."

"And I don't know what I would have done if I'd had to leave you," I meowed softly, touching my muzzle to Thornclaw's cheek. "But hey, that's *not* what happened. Isn't that all that matters?"

"I suppose so," Thornclaw agreed, shaking his head slowly. "But it was close, *really* close to happening. I don't think I've ever been so scared."

I snorted. "Says the tom who lived during Tigerstar's reign," I teased, nudging Thornclaw on the shoulder.

"And?" Thornclaw questioned, tilting his head as his eyes glittered with affection. "*None* of that beats thinking that you're going to lose your mate, the cat that you love more than anything else. And that our kits were going to lose such an amazing mother."

I sighed, not even wanting to think about what could have

happened if I didn't wake up, if Leafpool and Jayfeather hadn't managed to bring me back into the living world. "I don't think I could even bear the thought... and not being able to watch these three grow up," I murmured, my heart practically growing once again as I watched Lightningkit finally turn around to begin looking for his siblings, "would be insufferable."

I then *mrrowed* with laughter as Thornclaw shut his eyes, shaking his head quickly. "Okay, you're right, that's not what happened," he meowed rapidly. "Let's not talk about that anymore!"

"You brought it up, you weirdo!" I purred back, batting at my mate's face with a sheathed paw. After Thornclaw and I shared a brief laugh, I then let out another sigh. "It is true though. I can't imagine not being able to savor moments like this - the kits developing personalities, playing hide and seek..." I then let out a snort before muttering, "finding them in the fresh-kill pile..."

"Are you shocked, though? I'm not!" Thornclaw meowed as he stood up. "I can only expect that much from a daughter of mine!"

"Why, of course," I agreed as I then watched Thornclaw begin to pad towards the nursery entrance. "Where are you off to?"

Thornclaw paused and turned his head back to look at me. "Speaking of the fresh-kill pile..." he replied. "I'm going to get you something to eat, and grab Jayfeather to come and check on you."

"Thornclaw."

"Yes?"

"*Again?*"

"Of course!" my mate insisted. "He's the medicine cat, isn't he? It's his job to check up on his Clanmates."

"Is it his job to do that *three different times* before sunhigh?" I purred, shaking my head slowly.

Thornclaw shrugged. "Personally, I think he's slacking," my mate muttered before finally leaving the den. "I'll be right back!"

I watched Thornclaw go for a few heartbeats before taking a deep breath and lying back down in my nest. I was tired as heck, but my goodness, was I feeling relaxed and happy. *This is the life...* I thought. *And I quite mean it when I say that...*

Since I had woken up from my kitting a quarter moon ago, I think I had felt more gratitude in that duration than I had in my entire life. I could barely believe that for a moment, I had actually been dead, up in StarClan.

There was a chance that I could have died from my kitting. I would have left my family, my Clanmates, and my new kits. And as I had said to Thornclaw, not being able to watch our new litter grow up, and not being able to care for them, would have been the most heart-wrenching feeling.

The three little furballs had only been born a little over a quarter moon ago, but their personalities and appearances were already so prominent.

Wrenkit, the firstborn of this litter, could be described as very quiet, but calm, intelligent, and dignified. And the way he presented himself seemed so much like Thornclaw at times that it startled me. In fact, the two of them were almost carbon copies of each other except for Wrenkit's darker brown fur. I could already tell that my son was going to be a fantastic warrior, a leader in a sense. *But I could definitely see him becoming leader one day...*

Lightningkit had already made me laugh so many times that it practically made me weaker. He had such a bright, fun little personality. I had already started to call him "my little goofball". Aside from that, he was also very thoughtful and kind, and not to mention... kind of *clumsy*. But I could be sure that in the future, he was going to be loved by his Clanmates for who he was. *In many ways, he actually reminds me of Oreo...*

It could be proven by her tactics in hide and seek, but Emberkit was a little fireball - very energetic, intelligent, fiery and determined. She never seemed to tire in whatever she was doing, and she also had an incredible amount of optimism and kindness. Thornclaw had actually told me that she reminded him of me. *A very high*

compliment, if you ask me!

Along with that, as I had hoped, Emberkit also carried on my hazel eyes.

She had actually been the last of the litter to open her eyes, and I had gasped when my gaze met hers for the first time. *Now there are two cats that are kin with me that share my hazel eyes!* I had thought excitedly.

Anyway, as it has probably been established, all three of my kits were quite different from each other, but I didn't care. I loved them all equally, and would care for them and protect them with everything I had.

And as much as I was trying not to let it get to me, the encounter that I had had with Ashfur while I was in StarClan was still making me feel antsy. I had hoped that I would be able to watch over these kits in an Ashfur-less existence.

But the fact that he was now a dangerous Dark Forest cat with a grudge was the reality of it, and all I could do was keep my kits safe to the best of my ability. *Which unfortunately isn't much at the moment,* I thought jokingly, reflecting on how much my kitting had exhausted my body. *But I'm getting there!*

"Mistpelt!"

My ears pricked at the sound of my mother's name, and I looked up to see the fluffy gray she-cat making her way into the nursery. Emberkit, who had called her, was padding up to her with her hazel eyes wide.

"Did you happen to see Wrenkit while you were out there?" my daughter asked, her head tilting to the side.

"Now *he's* becoming the master hider!" Lightningkit mewed, walking up to stand by his sister.

Mistpelt's blue eyes glimmered as she looked down at her young kin. "Hm... well, I can't tell you where he is," my mother murmured, "but I'll give you a hint!"

Emberkit let out an excited squeal as she jumped up in the air. "Yes! A hint, please!"

"Pretty please!" Lightningkit mewed, kneading his paws into the ground.

Mistpelt narrowed her eyes as she slowly turned her head to look in the direction of camp. "I can't be so sure..." she muttered, "But I definitely saw what looked like a kit hiding near a den where some incredibly wise cats live..."

Emberkit gasped as her gaze shot back to her brother. "The elders den!"

"Let's go!" Lightningkit exclaimed, then brushing past Emberkit and leading her out of the den.

Mistpelt watched them go, her gaze full of affection and humor just until she turned back to look at me.

"Hi," she meowed evenly, her eyes now completely unreadable.

"Hi there," I muttered, giving my mother a curt nod. "Come to see the kits?"

"I did," Mistpelt replied. "But they're definitely very busy at the moment."

"Yes, they are," I then murmured as I looked down at my paws.

Then there was silence.

Not the peaceful, consensual kind of silence. No, that horrible, *horrible* awkward silence that feels like it's *actually* going to last forever.

It wasn't necessarily because there wasn't anything to say. In fact, under normal circumstances there would be plenty of things to say. It was that I didn't *want* to say anything.

Yes, Mistpelt and I were on okay terms ("okay" being a generous word), but I knew that I didn't want to pretend that things were

sunshine and rainbows all over again. I was still upset, and I thought that I had a right to be.

Mistpelt shifted her paws back and forth before finally speaking. "The kits are beautiful," she murmured as she clearly tried to meet my gaze. "I see so many different cats in all three of them."

"Definitely," I replied, only flicking my eyes to meet my mother's gaze for a heartbeat.

"I could go on forever.... but Emberkit with those hazel eyes looks almost exactly like you, Wrenkit looks so much like Thornclaw, and Lightningkit..." Mistpelt then paused, suddenly looking hesitant.

I narrowed my eyes, finally looking up to look at Mistpelt. "What of him?" I pressed.

Mistpelt continued to hesitate, then sighed as if she had given in. "Well, he looks a lot like Scourge, if I'm being honest," she answered. "His black pelt and white paws..."

I tried to suppress a groan of annoyance. *Gee, I never realized how much I would love being told that one of my sons resembles my evil father,* I thought sarcastically.

"Hm... Scourge," I muttered, nodding my head slowly as I continued to look at my mother with narrowed eyes. "You mean the tom that you hid as my father for seasons?" *And not to mention, my brother too!*

At my words, Mistpelt let out a frustrated sigh and rolled her eyes. "Lilypetal..." she breathed, shaking her head slowly. But when I let my gaze fall to the ground once more, I heard her let out a huff, and out of the corner of my eye I could see her turning and leaving the den.

Almost as soon as Mistpelt had left, Thornclaw emerged back in the nursery, a mouse now dangling from his jaws. Jayfeather was right behind him, herbs dangling from *his* jaws.

"Welcome back," I purred as Thornclaw plopped the mouse down in front of me, then curling himself around me in our den once again.

"Thanks for the prey, love."

For some reason, as I looked back at my mate, his eyes were full of concern. "Is something wrong?" he asked softly.

You can see it even through my cheerfulness? I asked Thornclaw in my mind. *Great StarClan, we've been together for so long that now he can read me like no other cat can.*

I simply shrugged back at Thornclaw, really not wanting to dwell on the tense encounter with Mistpelt for very long. "No, don't you worry," I replied to my mate, licking his cheek. "I'll tell you later."

I then sniffed, flicking my tail towards the mouse Thornclaw had brought me. "Right now, all I want to do is dig into this!"

Thornclaw purred with amusement, though his eyes still showed a bit of uncertainty. "Okay, if you're sure," he murmured warily.

I gave Thornclaw a definitive nod. "I am. Don't worry," I repeated, flashing him an affectionate look before turning to my mouse. I continued to ignore the uneasy feelings that were tugging at me.

As guilty as I felt by how cold I had been towards my own mother, I knew that chasing after her and apologizing for my behavior was the last thing I wanted to do. *I just... I just can't right now,* I thought as I bent down to take a bite of my mouse. *Not yet.*

Chapter 20

[image]

Swiftpaw's POV

The last thing that had crossed my mind as I went to sleep was also the first thing to cross my mind as I woke up.

My warrior assessment is today, I recalled just as my eyes flew open. *Great StarClan almighty...*

I'd finally made it. If I was to do well on this assessment, I could be a warrior tomorrow. And just as I had hoped - it was fairly early. Getting to be on a battle patrol a quarter moon into my apprenticeship had only been the beginning of the Dark Forest's benefits. Now, I was possibly going to be a warrior a couple of quarter moons early.

And unfortunately for Ashfur, so was Snowpaw.

As far as I knew, my fellow apprentice wasn't receiving any sort of special training like I was, yet she had been showing great promise as a warrior. *So much so that Foxleap and Icecloud melded our assessments together...* I thought bitterly.

I then shook my head quickly as I stood up in my nest, knowing that focusing on jealousy or resentment would only pull me away from my fullest potential in this assessment.

I'm here to help you focus on what's really important. Ashfur's words, as they typically did, were echoing in my head as I quietly padded over to Snowpaw's sleeping figure. *Being the best warrior that you can be.*

I have stayed focused, haven't I? I reflected as I then sat on my haunches. *And now I'm almost there...*

I then sighed, lifting a paw in order to prod Snowpaw awake. But I

immediately paused and nearly let out a gasp as I saw that she was wriggling quite violently in her sleep. Her eyes were screwed shut, and her claws were unsheathed, slashing out at nothing.

I found myself taking a step back as my eyes widened. *Well, I certainly don't want to be scratched in the face first thing in the morning,* I thought, sitting down in my new spot as I simply watched my friend twist and turn in her nest.

I flicked my ears as she then let out a quiet hiss. *She's clearly having a bad dream,* I realized. *I wonder what she's dreaming about?* Out of a mix of curiosity and a twinge of worry for Snowpaw, I decided to take the risk of trying to wake her up again.

But just as I stood up and hovered over her, my heart nearly skipped a beat as I watched Snowpaw practically jolt awake. Her blue eyes shot open into two wide moons. She was practically panting as she rolled over in her nest.

And just as our gazes met, I was baffled as suddenly an earsplitting yowl rang through my ears. Snowpaw then quickly stood up, rounding up on me. She stared back at me, her eyes blazing, teeth barred, fur bristled, and claws unsheathed.

But my friend's demeanor was the least of my problems at the moment - why she had just screamed like she was plummeting from the sky into a heap of fire-badgers was my biggest concern.

I flashed my friend a concerned look, then whipped my head back and forth, even checking the den entrance to make sure that Snowpaw hadn't woken any cat up before they planned to. "Snowpaw, what in the name of StarClan is wrong with you?" I hissed at her. "You probably just woke up every creature from here to the mountains!"

Snowpaw seemed to almost instantly snap out of whatever aggressive episode she had been in, as she blinked a couple of times, looking completely baffled as she let her fur lie flat.

That doesn't go to say that she suddenly looked relaxed. Her eyes still very clearly glinted with fear as she looked back at me.

"My goodness, I'm sorry," she breathed, shaking her head slowly. "Bad dream."

I snorted at that answer. "What kind of dream brings you to yowl at the top of your lungs?"

Snowpaw then began to shift her paws back and forth as she shrugged. "You just scared me," she murmured. "Wouldn't you be frightened to wake up to find a cat's gaze burning into you?"

My eyes narrowed down into two blue slits. *That's how I wake up into the Dark Forest every night, except it's to an older, mangy tom,* I said to myself, obviously knowing that I couldn't reveal that to Snowpaw out loud.

"That seems to be your excuse every time," I muttered instead. But when Snowpaw didn't give me any response to that, I pressed on. "Anyways, you seemed pretty distressed *while* you were asleep too. What was that all about?"

Still no answer. Snowpaw simply stood, her eyes still wide as she tried to catch her breath.

This seems to get worse with each time I see her wake up, I realized, beginning to well up with concern. It had now been at least a few moons now since Snowpaw had seemed to have troubled dreams, always waking up as if she had been yanked awake. Clearly now, asking her about it was out of the question.

Yet, I kept trying. "Are you still having weird visions and thoughts about medicine cat things?" I questioned, tilting my head to the side. That was the only possible idea I could come up with.

It hadn't shown as much as Snowpaw became closer and closer to being a warrior, but the strange medicine cat intuition that she seemed to carry was still there - confusing her and haunting her thoughts most of the time. *Surely it could cause her some distress in her dreams?*

To my surprise, Snowpaw actually nodded in response to my suggestion. "Yes, yes. That's it," she stammered, finally breaking her

gaze from me. "Great StarClan, do they give me trouble..."

I let out an unconvinced grunt. *Snowpaw might as well have been trying to tell me that Tigerstar's treachery back when he was alive was out of care for every cat around him.*

"Alright then..." I muttered, turning away from Snowpaw and beginning to pad out of the den. "Come on, we have our warrior assessment this morning."

I paused and slightly turned my head as Snowpaw gasped behind me. "Warrior assessment?" she repeated, sounding alarmed. "Today?"

"...Yes?" I replied after a few heartbeats, suddenly very confused. "Icecloud and Foxleap told us this at dusk yesterday." *That dream of hers must have really shaken her...*

Snowpaw seemed to finally come to her senses, shaking her head quickly and letting out a frustrated huff. "Right, right." She then sighed, sitting down in her nest. "That's right."

I let out a quiet purr of amusement as Snowpaw simply sat in her same place, not making any movements. "Um... are you coming?" I whispered, laughter in my voice.

"You go on ahead, Swiftpaw. I'll be out in a moment."

I sniffed, my head cocking back in response to Snowpaw's words. *What's there to wait for?* I wondered. *As daunting as a warrior assessment might be, I'd rather just get right into it...*

I forced myself to give Snowpaw a nod despite how puzzled I was. "Alright then," I muttered, finally turning away from my fellow apprentice and leaving the den.

As I traveled across the camp clearing, past all the hustle and bustle of the first patrols assembling and cats emerging from their dens, I continued to feel quite concerned about Snowpaw's behavior. I mean, yes, she was sometimes shy, and wasn't the bravest wild cat in the world by a landslide, but I had never seen her look so terrified.

I actually felt my heart sink as I came up with a possible reason. *As much as she tries to hide it, I think that Snowpaw is still angry with me over hurting her in that training session,* I realized. That incident had taken place over two moons ago now, and our friendship had certainly never been the same since then.

The two of us managed to joke around and have conversations every once in a while, but there was something so different about it that I thought we were both ignoring. Things had felt so forced. *Painfully* forced. It was almost like there was a physical barrier between the two of us, and we both had built it.

And it's all because I was coerced into harming her in a mock-fight session, I thought. *Hopefully I'll never have to do that again.*

As I gave a curt nod in greeting to Foxleap and Icecloud, I then thought, *and hopefully I won't be forced to contradict myself...*

"Good morning, you two," Foxleap meowed, lashing his tail.

I flicked my ears. *You two?*

I quickly whipped my head around to see that Snowpaw was just a couple of foxlengths behind me. She flicked a gaze full of uncertainty in my direction before settling down in front of our two mentors. I stared at her, eyes narrowed, before sitting beside her.

"Unfortunately, before we go out in the forest for your assessment, we have an apprentice task for the both of you to do," Icecloud meowed, her blue eyes glinting with slight sympathy.

Snowpaw and I exchanged a half-amused, half-apprehensive glance.

"But hopefully it will be one of your last!" Foxleap reassured us. "We just need you to switch out the nests in the nursery, then we should be on our way."

I simply gave Icecloud and Foxleap a nod before brushing past Snowpaw, leading the way towards a clump of moss I knew grew on a small fallen tree near the Highledge.

As I began to scoop up the vegetation, I couldn't help but wonder if

this was something that Ashfur would object. After all, it wasn't hunting or fighting. *If Ashfur gives me a scratch on the ear for this, he's hindering the start of my own warrior assessment.*

Once we had arrived at the fallen tree, Snowpaw and I collected our moss in silence, then proceeding to carry as much as we could to the nursery. Despite the leaf-bare weather and the stodgy atmosphere it usually carried with it, the sun was now shining bright, and I had to squint my eyes during the travel.

So, it was a relief to arrive into the shade of the nursery, Poppyfrost, Cherrykit and Molekit being the only cats inside at the moment. The tortoiseshell queen nodded to the two of us as we came in, and I wondered if Snowpaw noticed the gleam of bitterness in Poppyfrost's eyes as she had looked at me.

Wanting to avoid any sort of confrontation with the queen that I had practically made an enemy out of, I began to replace the moss in Daisy's and Ferncloud's nests while Snowpaw tended to Poppyfrost.

Cherrykit and Molekit had been asleep when Snowpaw and I arrived, but out of the corner of my eye I could see Cherrykit beginning to blink her eyes open with the slight racket. Her ears perked up as she noticed that Snowpaw was hovering over her nest.

"Oh, hi there, Snowpaw!" the ginger tabby she-cat mewed groggily through a yawn. I then noticed her eyes widen as her gaze fell on me working on Ferncloud's nest.

"Swiftpaw!" she exclaimed, standing up in her nest. "You're here too!"

I heard Poppyfrost let out a contemptuous grunt as Cherrykit trotted up to me. "Your warrior assessment is today, right?" the she-cat questioned as she tilted her head to the side.

"Yes, it is," I answered, beginning to gather up the old moss in order to dispose of it.

"That's so exciting!" Cherrykit squealed. "I'm sure you're going to be

fantastic."

For some reason, I heard Snowpaw sniff in response to Cherrykit's words. I flashed my friend a confused look through narrowed eyes before returning my gaze to Cherrykit. "Thanks, Cherrykit," I murmured, picking up the moss I had gathering in my jaws. "Ready to go, Snowpaw?"

"Almost done," Snowpaw muttered, beginning to collect the old moss from Poppyfrost's nest. "Give me just a moment..."

I sat down, waiting for Snowpaw to finish, as Cherrykit took a step closer to me. "You know, Molekit and I are going to apprentices any day now!" she meowed enthusiastically. "Maybe if you fail your assessment, we'll get to be denmates for a little while!"

I couldn't help but purr with amusement. "Hey, what happened to saying that I was going to be fantastic?" I teased to Cherrykit, lightly cuffing her over the ear with one of my paws.

To my surprise, Cherrykit simply shrugged, her gaze falling to the ground. "Well, you *are* going to be fantastic," she replied shyly, for whatever reason. "You definitely aren't going to fail..."

I then heard Snowpaw clear her throat, and I turned towards her to see her backing away from Poppyfrost's nest. "Alright, Swiftpaw. We're all good here," the white she-cat meowed as she began to pad out of the den. "Let's go."

"Alright," I meowed through a mouth full of moss. I then gave a nod of farewell to Cherrykit, Poppyfrost (hesitantly) and Molekit before following Snowpaw out into camp. We quickly disposed of our old moss before beginning to travel back to our mentors.

For some reason, Snowpaw was going at a fairly slow pace, almost as if she was wanting me to catch up with her. So, I picked up the speed so that we were walking side by side. I was intrigued as I noticed the clear glint of humor in her eyes. And somewhat excited, considering Snowpaw was actually making the effort to talk to me.

"What?" I questioned, already preparing myself for some really

weird answer, knowing Snowpaw.

Snowpaw snorted. "What do you mean, what?" she purred, shaking her head slowly. "I'm genuinely shocked that you haven't noticed."

"Noticed what?" I pressed, trying to keep myself from growling out of irritation.

"Great StarClan, I knew that toms could be dense, but you-"

"Snowpaw," I meowed angrily, cutting her off. "Obviously I don't know. What are you getting at?"

I nearly toppled over as Snowpaw then gave me an aggressive nudge on the shoulder. "I'm getting at that Cherrykit clearly likes you!" she exclaimed, sounding so excited almost to the point of squealing. "She literally acts like you're a warrior of TigerClan every time you're in her sight. You really haven't noticed?"

I nearly backed away, mentally blown over by Snowpaw's words. "What? No!" I replied, my eyes wide. "I haven't noticed, because it's not true."

I mean, the little ginger she-cat did seem to pester me every once in a while, but I had never thought much of it. Especially not for the reason that she could be padding after me.

I wasn't too sure how I felt about that prospect. Cherrykit was a very kind, enthusiastic, and bright she-cat that had great promise as a warrior, and I knew we would continue to be great friends. But seeing us as having *that* kind of future together...

Snowpaw sighed as we approached Icecloud and Foxleap, who were waiting by the camp entrance. "Hm, okay," she breathed in response to my skepticism. "Have fun living in denial!"

"Have fun being delusional," I muttered in my friend's ear before nodding to Foxleap and Icecloud. "We're ready now."

The two mentors exchanged a glance before standing up and leading Snowpaw and me into the forest. "Let's go, then," Icecloud meowed, flicking her tail to beckon us.

As we began to travel and trudge through the snow, I'd expect that I would have been fairly nervous at this point, my assessment to prove that I could become a warrior being only heartbeats away.

But I was too busy thinking about what Snowpaw had told me on our way back from the nursery. *I'm getting at that Cherrykit clearly likes you!* Her words echoed in my head. *She literally acts like you're a warrior of TigerClan every time you're in her sight. You really haven't noticed?*

I shook my head quickly as Foxleap, Icecloud, and I arrived at our usual training hollow. *How ridiculous is that?* I reflected. *Well... I mean, would it be so bad to live with the fact that Cherrykit might like me? She's-*

"Alright, you two," Foxleap began, interrupting my thoughts. "If you've talked to any warriors in your lifetime, you probably know what this assessment is going to involve."

"Catch as much prey as you can," Icecloud continued for her brother. "We'll be watching you while you do this, but you won't see us."

I let out a quiet sniff. *I certainly know what that's like.*

Foxleap then stood back up, flashing us a bright, but sympathetic glance. "I'm going to be honest, because it is leaf-bare, finding prey will be tougher, but try your best." My heart then began to beat faster as Foxleap nodded, flicking his tail towards the forest. "Go now, and Icecloud or I will tell you when you're finished."

Here we go.

I briefly nodded to the two older cats and began to pad off into the forest. Just as I was about to break into a run, I heard a small hiss from behind me, and I turned to see Snowpaw peering out from some brambles.

"Hey!" she whispered, dipping her head. "Good luck!"

Hey!

I flicked my ears, Snowpaw's words nearly being interrupted by a very familiar voice inside of my head.

You were about to say good luck back, weren't you?

I tried to keep myself from snorting right in front of Snowpaw. *It's kind of common courtesy...* I replied.

And pointless! Ashfur barked back at me. *That's your competition. She must realize that. She's already giving* you *the wrong idea - don't do it to her.*

A shiver then ran down my spine at Ashfur's next words. *You're here to show that you're better than her. Just go.*

With Ashfur's words in mind, I simply grunted in response to Snowpaw's words and pelted off into the forest, not daring to look back to see the expression of betrayal on her face.

~>~>~>~>~>~>~>~>~

"Swiftpaw! Snowpaw! You're finished."

I flicked my ears, lifting my head up as I finished burying my last catch.

I just finished my warrior assessment, I thought nervously, recollecting my catches and beginning to walk quickly back to the training hollow. I knew that I had done very well, but I still couldn't help but wonder if Foxleap or Icecloud had caught something that I hadn't - and I don't mean prey when I say that.

But to my relief, the two warriors eyes seemed to be glittering with satisfaction as I emerged through some shrubs. Snowpaw was there as well, her head held high in triumph.

"Welcome back," Icecloud purred as she lashed her tail. "Excellent job, you two."

"Very, very well done," Foxleap agreed.

I couldn't help but let out a quiet purr of amusement as I heard

Snowpaw gasp. "Really?" she squealed, her tail beginning to twitch excitedly.

"Yes, really," Icecloud replied, padding up to touch noses with her apprentice. The white she-cat then sat down, giving a nod to the both of us. "Foxleap and I will talk to Firestar about making the two of you warriors. It is very well-deserved."

"Tomorrow, maybe?" Foxleap teased, cocking an eyebrow as he turned his head to look at me.

My eyes widened. *I could be a warrior tomorrow,* I realized. *No. Way.*

Icecloud then stood up once again, beginning to pad in the direction of camp. "Well, what are we waiting for?" the she-cat purred. "We wouldn't want to deprive Firestar of hearing about some amazing apprentices!"

I immediately stood up as well and eagerly followed Foxleap and Icecloud deeper into the forest. I briefly glanced over at Snowpaw, hoping to see my own excitement reflected in her eyes.

But my heart nearly skipped a beat as my eyes were met with a set of narrowed blue slits. Snowpaw didn't say a word to me, and simply walked ahead to flank her mentor.

As heart-wrenching as a gesture that that could be for me, I was too enlivened by the thought of being a warrior that nothing else had the ability to cross my mind.

I had finally done it. My work had paid off. *And... Ashfur's help actually contributed to getting me here. It certainly hasn't put me at any disadvantage.*

For a moment, as I had many times in the past, I wondered if Ashfur's original motives for me had faded. Would he have helped me get this far if he had such ill intent towards me? I mean, my final assessment had been successful. I was becoming a *warrior* tomorrow.

I had become a Clan cat that others were intimidated by. I hadn't let vulnerability or other cats get in my way. I had reached my goal, so

all of it had surely been worth it? *All because of Ashfur's help...*

I actually managed to let out a satisfied huff as I trotted a little more quickly, catching up to the other three cats. *I had originally complied with his words out of fear and forced submission... but is that what's actually gotten me the furthest?*

Chapter 21

[image]

Goldenshine's POV

"All cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather beneath the Highledge!"

Just as I stood up and began to convene with the gathering ThunderClan cats, I nearly jumped, startled, as a very audible squeal came from the nursery. I flicked my ears and turned my head to see Cherrykit burst from the den, Molekit following more slowly behind.

I nodded in understanding as I settled down beside Dustystorm. *Ah, this must be their apprentice ceremony*, I realized. *How exciting!*

I then began to scan my eyes around the camp, letting them rest just briefly on almost every cat. *I wonder who their mentors will be?*

I then purred with amusement and exchanged a humored glance with Dustystorm as Cherrykit let out another squeal, pawing at her brother. *She's got spirit,* I thought. *I have to admit, I'll be jealous of whoever gets her as an apprentice. She'd be so much fun!*

"Are we late?"

I then whipped my head around towards the camp entrance just as Foxleap and Icecloud burst through the gorse tunnel. "We heard Firestar call the meeting and came as fast as we could!" Icecloud panted, her fur bristled out anxiously.

I shook my head quickly as I beckoned the two warriors into camp. "You're just in time!" I purred.

"Thank StarClan," Foxleap then breathed, settling himself down on my other side. "Luckily we had just finished up our assessment."

"Assessment...?" I asked, not knowing what the dark ginger was

talking about. I then was able to answer my own question when I took another glance at the camp entrance to see Snowpaw and Swiftpaw making their way in.

I immediately broke my gaze away as my eyes locked with my son's for just a heartbeat. I even found myself shifting away slightly as he passed by. Because unfortunately, fearing my son was what it had come to. Wanting to cower was my first impulse. *It's as if we never had any sort of relationship*, I thought. *And it's basically hopeless to fix it at this point.*

Once Swiftpaw's back was to me, I turned and watched as he settled down next to Blossomfall. And as usual, his face gave away nothing of what he was thinking.

I then nearly gasped as Foxleap's last words processed. "They... they just had their warrior assessment?" I questioned, briefly looking over at Snowpaw and seeing the satisfied gleam in her blue eyes. "How did it go for the two of them?"

Foxleap nodded eagerly in reply. "Very well," he answered as he lashed his tail happily. "I'm hoping that Icecloud and I can have a talk with Firestar after this Clan meeting about making them warriors."

My mouth nearly fell open as it all sunk it. "It" being the fact that my son was going to become a warrior all of the sudden. *And I missed it all...* I couldn't help but think as I felt my heart sink. *I missed my son grow up.*

And if that sad reality wasn't enough on its own, not only Swiftpaw, but Snowpaw was in this situation - the reincarnation of my sister - was all grown up again and was *becoming* a *warrior*. *And I still haven't managed to get Jayfeather to tell me what else is in store for her. It appears she is meant to be a warrior, not a medicine cat... but for StarClan's sake, what else is she meant to do?*

I found myself pressing a little closer to Dustystorm as I began to delve into my own little fun internal panic.

It was like all of these pieces of prey were being thrown at me. I

was being told to carry them all to dry land at once and bury them, but of course I had to gather *myself* and gather up all of the prey before I could actually *swim* to shore and do what I was supposed to.

But Foxleap, being himself, had no clue or just didn't take any notice. He murmured, seemingly half to himself, "I never got that Swiftpaw to lighten up, though..."

I pricked my ears, suddenly being brought back to reality at those words. Just as I was about to press Foxleap more and see what he had noticed about my son, Firestar began speaking.

"This morning, I have the honor of making two new apprentices," the ThunderClan leader meowed as he let his eyes flit around the camp clearing. He stopped once his gaze fell on Cherrykit and Molekit, who were receiving a grooming by Poppyfrost. Once the tortoiseshell queen noticed that the attention was on her two kits, she let out an almost inaudible gasp and gently pushed her two kits forward with one of her paws.

Firestar let out a faint purr of amusement before continuing. "Cherrykit and Molekit have reached the age of six moons, and are ready to begin their training." He then gave a definitive nod to the two young cats, then looking specifically at Molekit. "Molekit, from this day on, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Molepaw. Your mentor will be Rosepetal. I hope that she will pass down all she knows on to you."

I couldn't help but feel a twinge of happiness as I watched Rosepetal trot up to her new apprentice, touching her nose to Molepaw's as she began to excitedly whisper to him.

I then looked back at Firestar as he continued with the ceremony. "Cherrykit," Firestar meowed clearly, nodding to the little ginger she-cat, "From this day on, until you receive your warrior name, you will be known as Cherrypaw."

Then, to my complete bewilderment, Firestar turned slightly so that he was staring directly at me. "Goldenshine, you are ready to take on an apprentice. You have received excellent training from

Sorreltail, and you have shown yourself to be enthusiastic and determined. You will be the mentor of Cherrypaw, and I expect you to pass on all you know to her."

I tried to suppress a squeal as I nodded to Firestar. *Oh, I will!* I yelled to the ThunderClan leader in my thoughts. *I definitely will!*

Not only was I excited by the fact that I was now a mentor for the first time, but I was extremely relieved that Firestar trusted me enough to *be* one. As much as I hated to admit it, I had always questioned the extent that the ThunderClan leader trusted me. *Meeting with Breezepelt all those moons ago and having Swiftpaw with him certainly didn't look good for my loyalty...*

As the ceremony was closed off, I felt Dustystorm nudge me on the shoulder, and I met his blue gaze full of enthusiasm and admiration. "Look at you!" he purred, then licking my cheek. "Your first apprentice. I'm so proud of you!"

"I know!" I exclaimed, my tail twitching back and forth quickly. "And Cherrypaw too! I'm so excited!"

Dustystorm then let out a *mrrow* of laughter as he nodded his head towards the other side of camp. "Then what are you waiting for? Go for it!" he insisted as he then touched his nose to mine. "Tell me all about it later."

"Will do!" I replied before basically pelting across camp towards Cherrypaw. I found myself nearly having to skid to a halt once I was in front of her. But Cherrypaw didn't seem to care, because my level of excitement made me look like I was dead bored compared to hers.

"Hi, Goldenshine!" Cherrypaw exclaimed, kneading her paws into the ground as she looked up at me. "You're my mentor! I can't believe it!"

"Well, believe it, you little rascal!" I purred, touching my nose to Cherrypaw's head. "I'm going to try my absolute hardest to teach you everything I know."

I then nearly flinched back as Cherrypaw hopped in the air, letting out another squeal. "I know you will!" she meowed. She then stood up, her amber eyes wide with curiosity. "What's going on today? What are we doing first?"

I couldn't help but sniff and shake my head slowly as I watched Cherrykit. *It's like watching myself as an apprentice from the outside...*

"How about all four of us go on a ThunderClan territory tour?"

I flicked my ears and looked up to see Rosepetal and Molepaw approaching us.

Before I could even answer, Cherrypaw interrupted me with yet another squeal. "Let's go!" she exclaimed as she then began to pelt towards the camp entrance.

I exchanged an amused glance with Rosepetal before running to catch up with my apprentice. "Now, hold on a moment!" I called out to Cherrypaw, giving her a teasing nudge with my tail once she slowed down. "By yourself doesn't qualify as four!"

Cherrypaw then shyly shrugged and flashed me a bashful look.

I snorted, shaking my head slowly as I watched Rosepetal and Molepaw approach. Then, with a silent consensus exchanged, we all began to crawl through the camp entrance to begin showing the apprentices the territory.

To my complete surprise, Cherrypaw was already falling behind, for I noticed that she wasn't right on my tail as I made my way into the forest. I nodded to Rosepetal, letting her know that she could go ahead before crawling back through the gorse tunnel and peeking out the other side.

"Cherrypaw?" I meowed, moving my head back and forth. Just as I was about to call out for her again, I cut myself off as I noticed her just beside the camp entrance, looking back at something in the clearing.

I followed her gaze to see that, without a doubt, her amber eyes had fallen on a certain dark gray tom that was giving himself a quick

grooming over by the apprentices den. I then looked back at Cherrypaw, whose amber eyes seemed to glitter with longing and admiration as she looked back at my son.

I narrowed my eyes, a smirk emerging on my own face as I realized what this whole visual meant. *It appears that my apprentice may have some feelings for Swiftpaw...* I thought, humored. *I hope she'll never ask to receive a training session on how to get my son's attention...*

"Cherrypaw?" I repeated, this time finally getting her attention. "We're falling behind, let's go!"

Luckily, Cherrypaw seemed to snap out of her trance, her eyes glowing with enthusiasm once again as she followed me out of camp. "Whoops, I'm so sorry!" she mewed as I arrived out in the forest once again. "It's... I-"

I lightly touched my tail tip to Cherrypaw's shoulder, flashing her a warm look. "Don't worry about it," I meowed softly before brushing past the ginger she-cat and leading the way. *I, however, am worrying about it just a tad,* I thought to myself. What Cherrypaw was able to see in Swiftpaw considering his constant coldness, I had no idea.

But that didn't matter at the moment. All that I needed to focus on was bringing up Cherrypaw as the best warrior the Clans have ever seen!

"Now, what are we waiting for?" I purred. "Let's catch up to your brother! We wouldn't want him to see the ShadowClan border before you, would we?"

I *mrrowed* with laughter, Cherrypaw only taking a single heartbeat to be by my side again as we trotted quickly through the forest.

~>~>~>~>~>~>~>~>~

"And here is the WindClan border, up here at this stream," I meowed, the scents of WindClan's scent markers flooding through my nose as Rosepetal, Molepaw, Cherrypaw and I made our way to their boundary.

"WindClan lives on the moor, right?" Molepaw asked, looking

expectantly up at Rosepetal with his amber eyes.

Rosepetal gave her apprentice an approving nod. "You're exactly right!" she purred. I was then surprised to see her gaze flash with alarm for just a moment as she looked ahead. "And it looks like there's a patrol coming this way."

I gasped, then followed Rosepetal's gaze to see that the darker-cream she-cat was correct. A border patrol, I assumed, consisting of three cats was making their way towards us - Ashfoot, the WindClan deputy, along with Whitetail and Breezepelt.

I gave a curt nod to the black tom, the sight of my former mate then causing my eyebrows to raise as an idea crossed my mind. I had just come up with a plan, and I knew that I needed to go through with it immediately if it was to work. I let my gaze fall on Breezepelt once again, praying to StarClan that he would look back.

"Hello, there," Ashfoot, who was at the front, meowed to us. "Not treading along our border, I hope?"

I nearly sighed with relief as Breezepelt's amber eyes met mine.

"Not at all," Rosepetal replied, dipping her head as she lashed her tail towards Cherrypaw and Molepaw. "Just giving these two new apprentices a little tour. No need to worry."

I then flashed Breezepelt a warning look, nodding to my side of the border, hoping that he would get the message I was trying to nonverbally get to him.

"I would hope not," Ashfoot murmured as she turned around. "Carry on, then."

I felt a twinge of excitement as Breezepelt then gave me the slightest nod, so small that I wondered if he had even done it.

I then sat down, watching as the three WindClan cats turned around and began to pad deeper into their territory once again.

Once they were out of sight, I turned back to Rosepetal, Cherrypaw and Molepaw and meowed quite audibly, "You all go on ahead. I

think I'll stay here for just a moment and... and make sure that WindClan patrol doesn't cause any trouble."

Rosepetal tilted her head to the side as she looked back at me. "What kind of trouble could a patrol with three cats cause?" she meowed, her eyes gleaming with suspicion.

I snorted, trying to cover up the fact that Rosepetal had a point. "The kind of trouble that could go right over our heads if I don't check!" I insisted as I then averted my gaze to Cherrypaw. "I'll catch up in just a bit. In the meantime, make sure that I don't regret giving Rosepetal two apprentices to deal with."

Cherrypaw flashed me a reassuring look before following her brother and Rosepetal towards where I knew the Ancient Oak to be.

I then sighed with relief once I was sure that I was alone. It was the only way that this was going to work. *And what kind of example would I be setting for Cherrypaw to be talking with a cat from another Clan right in front of her?*

And anyways, what I planned to talk about with Breezepelt could certainly not be overheard by any cat.

I planned to consult Breezepelt about Swiftpaw. Even though the two of us hadn't been together for what felt like so many seasons ago, the fact that we shared a son would never change.

I had endured all of these struggles with Swiftpaw all by myself. Yes, I had willingly taken Swiftpaw into ThunderClan after he was born, but dealing with Swiftpaw's issues specifically had been difficult as a mother all on my own.

And since Swiftpaw had tried to hurt me that night by the fresh-kill pile, I felt practically helpless for what to do. Yes, I consulted Dustystorm whenever it was needed, but he was just as confused and lost in this situation as I was.

What else could I do but try and talk to Swiftpaw's father? I didn't know what else to do. Breezepelt and Swiftpaw had hardly interacted since Swiftpaw was born, but I had to take the chance

and see if Breezepelt had any idea of what was going on.

So, I continued to sit in the same place by the stream, hoping with all of my heart that Breezepelt was going to follow through.

And sure enough, the black pelt of my former mate appeared into my sight only heartbeats later. He emerged from some shrubs, then looked from side to sight cautiously before leaping across the stream into ThunderClan territory.

It was then that I realized how incredibly strange that this felt - me waiting just inside ThunderClan's border as Breezepelt carefully made his way over to meet me, just as it had been done when we met secretly as mates.

Oh, how naive and stupid I was then, I thought as flashbacks of our time together ran through my head. *Once that ended, who knew that I'd ever be doing it again?*

I then couldn't help but feel a small twinge of guilt. Not because I had lingering feelings at all, but just the fact that I was meeting with a tom I had once called my mate certainly wouldn't make Dustystorm happy.

Well, that has an easy solution, I told myself as I nodded to Breezepelt in greeting. *I'll just tell Dustystorm and pray to every spirit in StarClan that he understands!*

I was then pulled from my thoughts as Breezepelt finally spoke, returning the nod of greeting. "What is it? Hurry up, please," the black tom muttered, nodding his gaze towards WindClan territory. "We're both short on time."

I nodded quickly, glad for just a moment that we had established a friendship at a recent Gathering, resulting in the two of us being able to speak to each other comfortably once again. "I have to talk to you about Swiftpaw," I replied, cutting right to the chase.

Breezepelt's eyes suddenly widened, and he looked too thrown off to even speak.

So, I prompted him further. "Our son. Remember him?"

Breezepelt's gaze then flashed with anger for just a heartbeat. "Of course I do!" he snapped. "What is there to talk about?"

I narrowed my eyes, realizing that I was receiving a completely different vibe from Breezepelt than any other time I had spoken to him before. I'd always known him to be short-tempered, but his demeanor exuberated hostility more than ever before.

I wondered why.

Breezepelt and Swiftpaw really are father and son... "Well, that's the thing. I don't exactly know!" I sighed as I shook my head. "For moons now, he's been nothing but an aggressive, closed-off, *mean* cat, and I have no idea why!"

Breezepelt seemed to listen intently to my words, but I felt a nervous pang in my stomach as his eyes narrowed, and his amber gaze glinted ominously. He didn't reply either.

But I desperately needed to get this off of my chest, so I went on despite not getting any feedback. "I mean, I never told you, but even back when he was a kit, something was wrong!" I spilled out to my former mate. "He always was rough on the other kits and he always looked as if he had gotten no sleep at all. If only it had stayed that easy... who *knew* what I'd have to deal with later?"

I then began to pace back and forth. "It's like something's corrupted him... I don't understand!" I nearly wailed. "He's aggressive, so seclusive. The fact that he's a skilled fighter is all that he's got going for him at this point! And I can't speak to him either. He won't let me! How StarClan let him become such a heartless cat, I have no idea."

As I had spoken, drowning in my own rant and releasing the words I had needed to speak for so long, I had gotten so carried away that by the time I was done I was facing away from Breezepelt a few fox-lengths away.

So, I took a deep breath, ready to apologize for my tangent, but immediately fell speechless as I met Breezepelt's blazing gaze.

"How could you say something like that?" the WindClan tom hissed, his fur beginning to bristle.

To say the least, I was utterly bewildered. "What did I say? I'm only speaking the truth!"

"How dare you accuse him of being heartless?" Breezepelt then growled through gritted teeth. "Why are you set on thinking so lowly of him?"

I don't have much of a choice! I opened my mouth, ready to defend myself, but Breezepelt spoke again before anything could come out. "You have no idea what he's endured!"

"Well, I don't!" I finally was able to exclaim. And just as I was about to go on with a spitting remark, I paused, Breezpelt's words setting in. "But... how do you?" I murmured, my eyes narrowing.

"I don't," Breezepelt hissed, whipping himself around and leaping back across the stream just within a couple of heartbeats. "Don't be ridiculous."

I let out a very distressed huff as I watched my former mate pad back onto his own territory. *What in the name of StarClan? Is that it?* "Hey!" I called over to him. "What happened to us talking about our son?"

Breezepelt paused, just slightly turning his head to look back at me. "*Our son* is fine," he murmured in a menacingly quiet voice. He then looked away once again as he crawled through some bushes. "Clearly you're just making a spectacle. Go back to your little apprentices."

I let out a genuinely offended gasp. "*I'm* making a spectacle?" I growled back.

I then let out a contemptuous hiss. "Some father you are!" I called back before whipping myself around and stomping into the ThunderClan forest.

I then sighed with extreme exasperation. Why Breezepelt had seemed so disgruntled by Swiftpaw's issues, I couldn't even begin to

comprehend.

I was feeling more lost and confused than I ever had before. I had no idea who I could turn to now.

You know who would probably have the perfect thing to say to me right now? I asked myself as I slashed at some snow on the ground. *I'm sure Snowflight would know exactly what to do if I were to ask her.*

As I looked back to stare off at the place that Breezepelt disappeared, I shook my head slowly. *And your spirit is here, but... you're not here to solve my problems, are you?* I thought. *I know that there's something you're seeing in my son that I still haven't quite grasped yet. Oh, what is it?*

I then broke into a run, finally deciding to re-join the ThunderClan territory tour and push away my worries for a bit of the day, as strong and horribly overwhelming as they were.

Chapter 22

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

I wrinkled my nose, trying to chew as quickly as I could after licking up the chamomile Jayfeather had laid at my paws. As much as I needed the strengthening herbs after such a difficult kitting, dealing with their bitter taste was becoming *awfully* tedious.

I flashed Thornclaw an amused look as he began to snicker next to me. "I think that's my favorite expression I've ever seen on your face," my mate purred.

I finally swallowed, shaking my head quickly to cope with remains of the vile flavor. "Well, take it in then! I hopefully won't have to be taking these for much longer," I meowed cheerfully as I took a small stretch, the action being incredibly painful, but relieving at the same time. I had grown so stiff from so much lack of movement, but it hurt to move still, so I *couldn't* move that much.

I sighed as my gaze then fell on where Goldenshine was playing mossball with Wrenkit, Lightningkit and Emberkit. *And I want more than anything to give these three a badger ride... or chase them around the camp...* I thought longingly. *Oh, StarClan, give me strength! Physical strength!*

I then felt a muzzle press itself on my cheek. I closed my eyes, a purr rumbling in my throat as I let myself be comforted by Thornclaw's touch. As he then pulled away, I met his pale blue gaze that was filled with so much love and warmth.

I returned it, my heart lifting from my frets for just a moment. *I'm already getting all of the mental strength I could possibly have. I'm so thankful.*

I nuzzled my head into my mate's neck, then pulling away so that I could give gratitude to the gray tabby tom who had delivered me

my putrid strengthening herbs.

"Thank you, Jayfeather," I meowed to the medicine cat, who had been quietly scoffing as he watched the kits, to my amusement. I then lightly touched the tip of my tail to the younger tom's shoulder as he turned to face me. "Really, thank you so much."

"Sure," the tom responded, giving me a curt nod and then turning to leave the den. "I'll be back with some borage."

"Thank you!" I called out, then nodding to Goldenshine. Before Jayfeather had come into the nursery with the chamomile, Thornclaw and I had been eager to hear all about her first day as a mentor. "Anyway, keep going, Goldenshine. How did Cherrypaw handle the territory tour?"

My daughter didn't answer immediately, as she seemed to be staring intently at absolutely nothing, clearly deep in her own thoughts.

I exchanged a half-amused, half-concerned glance with Thornclaw before turning back to her. "Goldenshine?"

After a few heartbeats, the golden tabby she-cat shook her head quickly, looking genuinely surprised with herself and her zoned-out episode. "Oh my goodness, I'm so sorry," Goldenshine breathed, sounding quite distressed. "What did you say?"

"That's alright, sweetheart," I meowed softly, gazing at my daughter sympathetically. "Are you alright?"

"Yes," Goldenshine meowed surprisingly sharply. "Tell me what you said."

Tell me what's wrong with you, I wanted to meow, but as much as I could prompt Goldenshine to talk about whatever was clearly troubling her, I could already sense that I wouldn't get anything from her. "I asked how Cherrypaw handled the territory tour."

"Hm, well..." Goldenshine began, then trailing off as she batted the mossball with a paw, causing the three kits to excitedly chase after it once again. "Cherrypaw was having the time of her life, to say the

least. She was so eager to take in every tree, every bush, every tuft of snow!"

My daughter then snorted as she shook her head slowly. "I almost felt like *I* was the apprentice from how many questions she asked me!" she mewed. "Once we got back to camp, she was already so desperate to know what we would be doing tomorrow."

"What *are* you doing with her tomorrow?" I asked out of curiosity.

"Hopefully a hunting lesson!" Goldenshine replied, pushing the mossball once again at Emberkit's urging. "Cherrypaw is absolutely wonderful. I'm already looking forward to it."

"The two of them together is too much chaos, if you ask me." Jayfeather muttered as reentered the den. "Great StarClan, Goldenshine's too much on her own."

"Goldenshine is the most awesome cat in this Clan? Why, thank you, Jayfeather," Goldenshine purred as the medicine cat approached me. My daughter then lashed her tail, humored, as Jayfeather let out an annoyed huff and rolled his eyes.

As prickly as that Jayfeather is, he still manages to be a cat that brings out Goldenshine's best side, like Snowflight did, or Dustystorm does, I realized. *To be honest, this is a friendship that I never saw coming!*

The familiar scent of borage was already flooding through my nose as Jayfeather let the leaves fall in front of my muzzle. "This should hopefully be the last time I need to give you these," he commented as I began to munch on the herbs. "Your milk has been fairly plentiful these past few days, but I'm just going to play it safe for tonight."

"No harm in doing that!" I purred after swallowing my last bite. "Thanks again, Jayfeather."

I felt Thornclaw shift slightly next to me. "If you're playing it safe, should you be doing anything else for her?" he murmured, tilting his head as his pale blue eyes narrowed.

"Thornclaw," I meowed firmly, my voice full of laughter as I flashed

my mate an amused, but warning look.

"Okay, okay, fine," Thornclaw sighed, rolling his eyes, then returning his gaze to his daughter. "Anyway, is there anything else going on with you?"

Goldenshine pondered her father's question for a few heartbeats, then shrugged as her gaze fell to the ground. "Swiftpaw's going to be a warrior tomorrow," she muttered. "His assessment apparently went very well."

I exchanged another concerned glance with Thornclaw before attempting to search our daughter's gaze, because Goldenshine had said those words as if she were simply telling us she had made a good catch on a casual hunting trip, not that her *own son* was becoming a *warrior*.

Contain yourself, will you? I thought sarcastically. "Well... that's exciting, isn't it?" I asked Goldenshine. After Goldenshine herself had become a warrior, I think it was all I had talked about for the next couple of days. In Goldenshine's case, it looked like she didn't even want to *think* about Swiftpaw's success.

Yet Goldenshine looked taken aback by my question. "Of course it is!" she insisted, but then proceeded to let out a long sigh.

I stared back at Goldenshine through narrowed slits, realizing that there was actually an explanation behind this behavior... why she didn't seem to be showing much excitement towards her own kit. *Swiftpaw and Goldenshine have been very distant lately,* I thought. *Is it as bad as it appears?*

I then felt a pang of nervousness in my heart as more possibilities built up. *Does this have to do with Swiftpaw training in the Dark Forest?* I wondered. *I assume that Goldenshine knows about it, and surely it'd make her very upset...*

I mean, I assumed that Goldenshine knew about Swiftpaw's secret. I did, Thornclaw did, and I could be almost completely sure that Jayfeather did.

Jayfeather, who was still in the den, seemed to be reflecting all of the concern and worry that I felt. He gave my daughter a long look, almost as if he could see, before standing up and beginning to leave the den once again.

"It's getting late," he murmured, turning back to where Thornclaw and I were still settled in our nest. "Lilypetal, you should probably get some rest." The medicine cat then nodded to Goldenshine, flicking one of her ears with his tail. "You too, mouse-brain."

Goldenshine let out another sigh before standing up. "Alright, alright," she breathed, then waved her tail over to Lightningkit, Emberkit, and Wrenkit, who were now in a mock-fight. "Let's play mossball again soon!"

Lightningkit paused mid-fight, flashing Goldenshine a bright look. "Yes, please!"

"Definitely!" Wrenkit agreed before leaping onto Emberkit once again.

"Bye, Goldenshine!" Emberkit squeaked as she wrestled with her brother.

Goldenshine then nodded to Thornclaw and me in farewell as she walked side by side with Jayfeather out of the nursery.

"Are... are you heading off to sleep too?" I could still hear my daughter meowing from outside the den, speaking to Jayfeather. For whatever reason, she had sounded somewhat hesitant when asking her question.

"I will," I heard the medicine cat reply evenly. "I just need to grab some poppy seeds to drop off to Mistpelt first. She's been having some back aches."

I furrowed my eyebrows as Jayfeather's words processed. *Mistpelt's been having back aches?* I repeated to myself worriedly. *I guess she's truly becoming an elder now...* And as much as I didn't feel ready to truly reconnect with my mother again, I hated for her to be in any sort of pain. *Maybe... maybe I'll pay her a visit tomorrow...*

I then flicked my ears, slightly startled as Thornclaw quickly stood up. "Hey, hey, hey! Let's take it easy!" the golden tabby tom meowed, and I turned to see Lightningkit spitting out what looked like tiny chunks of moss. I then shook my head slowly as I smirked, not surprised at all as Thornclaw seemed to be getting after Emberkit.

"Throwing the mossball is okay, that's the point of the game," my mate meowed calmly as he looked down at his daughter. "But maybe don't throw the mossball to Lightningkit when he's already less than a mouse-length in front of your face..."

Emberkit, looking truly guilty, flashed her brother an apologetic look before letting her head hang low. "I'm sorry..." the little she-kit murmured.

"I know you are," Thornclaw meowed softly, his eyes warm. "Just learn for next time."

Instantly after that, Emberkit shot her head back up, her eyes bright once again. "Okay, I will!" she exclaimed. "I will, I will!"

"Alright, my lovelies," I then meowed to my kits after taking a quick glance outside. "It's time for your last meal of the day, and then you're going to sleep. Moonhigh is already approaching."

Not to my surprise at all, all three of the kits groaned in disappointment.

I let out an amused grunt in response, rolling over so that my belly wasn't exposed anymore. "Alright then, starve," I murmured, trying to suppress my purrs. "See if I care!"

Emberkit's eyes nearly seemed to pop out of her head as she gasped. "No!"

"We're done playing!" Wrenkit insisted, pushing Lightningkit off of him, resulting in the little black tom falling onto his side.

But Lightningkit almost immediately found his footing again, shooting up from the ground. "Yeah! We're *hungry!*"

I purred with amusement and pretended to be annoyed as I adjusted myself once again. "Oh, fine. I *guess* I'll feed you!"

All three kits proceeded to squeal with excitement as they ran up to our nest. As they began to suckle, I felt a huge wave of exhaustion rush through me. And by the time that Emberkit, Lightningkit and Wrenkit were done with their meal and pressed up against me to go to sleep, I was nodding off.

I let out a huff as I closed my eyes and leaned into Thornclaw's fur. Then, as a strong, chilly wind made its way into the den, a shiver ran down my spine, and I curled my tail tighter around my kits, pressing even closer to my mate. "Great StarClan, it's freezing," I whispered to him.

"*Freezing* doesn't even begin to cover what it's like out there. I'm thinking that the lake is going to be a big bowl of ice for all of eternity," Thornclaw whispered back. And after the two of us shared a quiet laugh, he let his head rest against mine and he twinned his tail with my own. "Goodnight, Lilypetal. I love you."

"Goodnight, Thornclaw. I love you too," I murmured, then touching my nose to each of my kit's sleeping heads. "And goodnight, my kits. Don't worry, I'm going to be able to play with you soon." *At least, I really hope so!*

Practically already half-asleep, my mouth opened up into one last yawn as I closed my eyes for the night.

~>~>~>~>~>~>~

Wake up.

I rolled over slightly in my nest, trying to get more comfortable and filling out the empty space as a weird, barely-audible voice kept echoing in my ear. *Wake up.*

I tried to push it away, assuming that I was just dreaming.

Wake up, you mouse-brain!

As it felt like a cat was basically screaming in my ear, I was

suddenly jerked awake. I managed to lift my head up and quickly whip it around the den as I wondered who in the name of StarClan had decided it would be fun to wake me up by screaming in my ear.

But there was no cat around that could have possibly done it, I was sure. *Not unless someone's pulling some prank...* I thought, but figured that even the goofiest ThunderClan cats wouldn't *dare* do something like that.

And the cats in closest proximity to me - Daisy, Ferncloud and Thornclaw - were all still fast asleep. *Weird... very weird.*

I decided to brush it off and try and get more sleep. I let out another yawn, snuggled closer to Thornclaw, and closed my eyes once again.

But I almost immediately opened them, the curiosity of the strange voice still tugging at me. I lifted up my head to look around again, possibly to find some strange cat in the shadows. *Nothing. No one.*

I then looked down at my flank. *And it certainly couldn't have been one of the kits, they're not even here!*

I sighed, lying my head down and closing my eyes yet again. *I'm just going to blame it on my wild imagination.*

My eyes then shot open once again. *Wait a moment.*

I glanced down at my flank once again, letting out a horrified gasp at something I hadn't been able to process with my initial grogginess.

The kits aren't here! I realized fearfully, my heart beating so fast that I was sure that it was going to, or *I* was going to, go into some sort of overdrive. *No wonder there was so much room in the nest when I moved! Foxdung, foxdung, foxdung.*

I whipped my head back around, practically digging my claws into Thornclaw's fur as I attempted to shake him awake. "Thornclaw, wake up! Oh, for the love of StarClan, please wake up!" I cried.

Thornclaw's head shot up almost immediately and his eyes were

filled with alarm as he looked back at me. "What? What's wrong?"

I forced myself to stand up as I stared back at my mate with wide eyes. "*The kits are missing!*" I yowled, probably louder than I had ever said anything in my entire life. "They're not here! They're not in the den!" I then tried my hardest to move around the den, my bones still stiff.

"Lilypetal, no," Thornclaw meowed sharply, his blue eyes piercing through the darkness. "You're not moving a muscle."

I snorted, looking at Thornclaw with wide eyes. "Are you insane? I'm not going to lie here when my kits are *not in here! We don't know where they are!*"

Thornclaw took a step closer to me, briefly touching his nose to my cheek. "I'm looking for them." He then nodded to Ferncloud and Daisy, who were already padding away from their nests and leaving the nursery. "Daisy and Ferncloud will look for them. I'm sure ThunderClan is going to already be looking for them, too."

As I began to breath heavily, Thornclaw held my head up with his tail so that I'd look at him. "They probably were just restless and wandered into camp," he meowed more softly.

"But what if they didn't?" I demanded. I was now shaking like a frail fall leaf. "What if they've *left* camp?"

"Then we will find them out in the forest and bring them right back," Thornclaw whispered firmly before whipping himself around and leaving the den. "Stay there!"

Although Thornclaw had clearly been trying to stay brave for me, it was even more apparent that he was just as anxious and petrified as I was. He had spoken firmly, giving me reassuring words, but his eyes had glittered with fear, and his voice had shaken slightly with each word he'd said.

I shook my head slowly, trying to steady my breathing. I was now alone in the nursery with my worried thoughts, which probably wasn't the best thing for me at all. So, I came up with my own

compromise, deciding to pad up to the entrance of the nursery and at least try and get a glimpse of what was going on.

I had already begun to hear the murmurs and pawsteps of many cats, but I was still shocked to see that the ThunderClan camp was completely packed; cats running back and forth, peering behind dens, sniffing every single bush, looking under every branch...

This isn't good, I thought in complete dismay. *If they're having to look this precisely, the kits probably aren't in camp.*

Firestar and Brambleclaw were at the center of the camp search, and they seemed to already be getting together a search patrol to go out into the forest.

Luckily, this already brought me some reassurance. *And they'll hopefully just find them in a snowball fight in the training hollow*, I tried to tell myself.

Cloudtail, who had just approached the gorse tunnel to sniff it out, was turning around to pad up to the leader and deputy as I happened to glance back over at him. "They've definitely left the camp," the white warrior confirmed. "All three of their scents lead out into the forest."

"StarClan, no," I breathed, screwing my eyes shut as I shook my head.

"Can you guess how long ago they left?" Firestar pressed to his kin.

Cloudtail cast a worried glance back at the gorse tunnel before looking back at the ThunderClan leader. "Their scent isn't as fresh as it could be," he admitted. "They've definitely had some time to get somewhere, wherever that is."

"Well then, what are we waiting for?" Brambleclaw insisted, lashing his tail impatiently. The deputy then quickly scanned the camp, his eyes narrowed. "Cloudtail, Whitewing, Thornclaw and Goldenshine - come with me." The tabby warrior then raised his head, already leading the patrol he had gathered out of camp. "Everyone else, stay here and keep an eye out in case the kits return!"

"Hold on a moment!"

The leaving patrol paused and looked back. I gasped, whipping my head around to see Mousefur and Purdy emerging from the elders den.

"What?" I called out from the nursery. "Have you found the kits?"

Mousefur didn't answer immediately, her eyes flitting worriedly around the camp. "No, we didn't find the kits," she finally replied, her gaze darkening. "In fact, I think another cat is missing. Where has Mistpelt gone off to?"

My heart suddenly felt as if it had dropped to the ground.

Firestar's eyes widened as he also took a quick look around the camp. "Mistpelt isn't here?" he asked.

"She disappeared as soon as it was announced that the kits were missing," Spiderleg called out.

"What?" I yowled, whipping my head over to look at Spiderleg as my heart began to beat even faster. "Did you see where she went?"

"Don't you think I would tell you if I knew?" Spiderleg snapped back.

I ignored the black and brown tom's harsh tone, and I didn't reply either. I couldn't. I was overcome by a thought that had crossed my mind, one that I was too sure was true.

Mistpelt left to look for the kits.

Realizing that I couldn't bear to spend one more moment just standing, watching the action, I burst from the nursery, using absolutely everything I had to pelt out of camp. I ignored the yowls of protest I heard from behind me. Yes, Brambleclaw had gathered a search patrol, but I couldn't *stand* the waiting.

If any cat was following me, I was absolutely blind to it. All that mattered to me right now was finding my kits, or finding Mistpelt first to keep her from finding them.

Jayfeather had said she's having back aches... she's getting weaker with each day! I thought worriedly. *She's in no condition to be out in the forest during leaf-bare looking for kits!*

I had only been out of camp for a few heartbeats, and it felt as if my legs could barely hold my weight. I was losing breath, and I felt slightly light-headed.

I then shook my head quickly. *Get yourself together!* I tried to take deeper breaths and move at a slightly slower pace, despite how much I wished I could pelt through the forest in a few heartbeats.

But actually, slowing down was what caused me to eventually catch the kits' scent trail. And as I had feared, Mistpelt's was mingled in with theirs. *She's definitely been looking for them.*

This realization caused me to quicken my pace once again, and I bent my head low to the ground as I tried to follow the scent trail. It was faint, and the snow didn't make it much easier to track, but it was there.

Luckily, my adrenaline and fear were giving me surges of energy, but by the time the scents of my kits and Mistpelt were as strong as ever, I was about ready to collapse.

But I forced my legs to straighten once again. *I'm going to find them*, I told myself as I came to the end of their scent trail. *I'm going to find them and bring them all back safely.*

I finally lifted my head up, and I realized that I had been led to the lake. I tried to push down my immense dread of what I could find here. At first, it was too dark for me to see anything.

But it didn't take me long to realize that the "darkness" was actually just the spotting of my own vision. I shook my head quickly once again and took a deep breath, which luckily resulted in me being able to see the moonlight casting itself onto the lake.

And the first thing that I was able to process was truly the most terrorizing one I've ever seen. My heart felt as if it had actually stopped.

They were fairly far out, but I could make out Wrenkit and Lightningkit standing on the ice, their fur completely drenched as they stared fearfully down at something.

It was then that I realized that there was a crack in the ice where it had clearly broken under some weight. At the top of the water, I could just barely see a gray head bobbing up and down as paws thrashed weakly all around.

I then let out a shocked, horrified gasp as Mistpelt's head burst above the water, and I recognized the wet ginger and white fluff in her mouth to be Emberkit.

The kits fell through the ice, and Mistpelt went in to save them, I concluded as I tried to run towards the lake. *Mistpelt is going to drown, or the kits might fall back in!* I thought anxiously. *I need to help her! I need to get the kits to shore!*

But as I was about to leap on the ice, I slipped on some slick snow and fell to the ground. I yowled out of helplessness and dismay. *No! There's no time to spare!*

I tried with all of my might to stand back up, but it felt as if my legs had finally given out. They weren't going anywhere.

And unfortunately, I had already figured out what it was probably costing me.

I was able to look up and watch as Emberkit scrambled back onto the ice, running up to stand next to her brothers. But all three of them stood there, eyes wide as they watched Mistpelt continue to feebly thrash through the water. They were so small, there was no way that they would be able to do anything at all except further endanger themselves.

I could already tell that it was taking absolutely everything that Mistpelt had to stay above the water, and I knew that her back pains couldn't be doing her any favors. "Mistpelt, you can do it!" I called out to my mother with all of the remaining strength I had in my voice. "Just keep doing what you're doing! A patrol will be here at any moment to help you!"

But as much as I tried to tell myself that, maybe even more so than Mistpelt, a certain horrible feeling that was tugging at my heart was telling me that it was too late.

I had been too late. I was here, but I had used up all of the strength I'd had that I could have possibly used to save my mother.

And just as this dawned on me, all I could do was watch and wail out as Mistpelt's head vanished under the water one last time.

"No!" I called out, my voice breaking as I did so. I dug my head into the snow and put my paws over my ears as I began to whimper uncontrollably. *She's gone,* I thought, barely being able to stand the thought. *My mother's gone. She sacrificed herself to save my own kits.*

I never even got to tell her that I was sorry...

It seemed like a whole eternity had gone by when I finally could hear pawsteps in the snow behind me.

"Lilypetal?" I recognized the soft voice of Whitewing as a cat paused to stand next to me. I looked up to meet the she-cat's concerned green eyes. "What happened?"

Barely being able to speak, I nodded weakly towards the lake. "The kits... on the ice..." I rasped to her. "Get them. Now."

Whitewing didn't say anything else, and seemed to beckon other cats to follow as she cautiously padded onto the ice.

"Lilypetal!" I then recognized the voice of my mate, and I felt a nose touch my shoulder as he tried to help me up.

"Get the kits..." I repeated to Thornclaw.

"Goldenshine, Brambleclaw, Whitewing and Cloudtail are getting them right now," Thornclaw meowed softly to me, taking my weight as I finally managed to stand up. "Where's Mistpelt?"

Hearing my mother's name only further pulled me down into my sea of grief. I fell speechless once again, only being able to shake my head weakly at Thornclaw as I screwed my eyes shut.

Thornclaw's eyes slowly widened next to me, and after a few heartbeats, his gaze grew solemn as he nodded and touched his nose to my ear. "Come on, we need to get you and the kits back to camp. Don't worry, I'm right here."

"The kits..." I rasped, those being the only two words I could manage.

"Brambleclaw, Goldenshine, Whitewing and Cloudtail have the kits," Thornclaw repeated softly as he licked my head. My mate's voice then slightly shook as he meowed, "We need to get you to the medicine den right now."

I nodded weakly, leaning on Thornclaw's shoulder and closing my eyes as I let him guide me.

"What's happening?" I heard Wrenkit mew far behind me.

"That brave fluffy gray she-cat helped us!" Emberkit squealed. "She was swimming for such a long time! Where did she go?"

Oh my StarClan. It hurts so much. I shut my eyes even more as another whimper full of grief escaped me.

I could now say for sure that this pain hurt more than any battle wound, any scratch, any deep cut... even my Dark Forest-cursed kitting. All of that was *nothing* now.

Now I had to live this horrible internal pain that would last only StarClan knows how long - the fact that Mistpelt was dead, and she had died amidst my bitter grudge.

Chapter 23

[image]

Swiftpaw's POV

I let out a hiss of frustration as I was abruptly pulled from my sleep. I was being shaken so violently that I was sure that I was going to lose a limb.

But as I began to blink open my eyes, I realized that maybe it was already sunhigh, and I was being woken up for my warrior ceremony.

Immediately being able to shove my annoyance to the side, I fully opened my eyes and lifted up my head eagerly. I was confused to see that it was nearly pitch-black in the den, many urgent meows were coming from outside, and Cherrypaw was hovering over me, her amber eyes wide.

I scoffed with irritation as I stood up in my nest. "Cherrypaw," I meowed sharply to the she-cat who was going to be my denmate for just a single night. "What is going on? Why did you wake me like that?"

Cherrypaw shifted her paws back and forth, her gaze falling to the ground as I had looked at her. "I'm sorry... I was just trying to-" the she-cat then cut herself off, shaking her head quickly. I then nearly took a step back as her eyes flashed with alarm.

"Lilypetal's and Thornclaw's kits are missing!" she exclaimed, then turning around to leave the den. "We have to help look for them. Come on!"

What?! I thought as I stood frozen in place, a wave of fear and worry running through me. *Oh, no... they could be anywhere!*

I then couldn't help but recall the time that I myself had escaped the camp as a kit. *I had nearly been mauled by a fox!* I thought

nervously. *There's not a fox loose that we know of, but it's in the middle of leaf-bare!*

"Swiftpaw?" Snowpaw meowed groggily from behind me, and I turned to see her blinking her eyes as she slowly stood up, Molepaw doing the same in his nest. "What's happening?"

I slowly turned around to face my fellow apprentices. "Lilypetal's kits are missing," I meowed, trying to keep my voice from shaking.

Snowpaw's blue eyes immediately widened, and she shot up out of her nest and nudged Molepaw. She then looked back at me, her gaze suddenly confused. "Then what are you standing there for?" she demanded to me as she and Molepaw began to leave the den. "These cats will need all the help they can get to find them!"

Yanking myself out of my own shock and fret, I shook my head quickly and then proceeded to follow Snowpaw and Molepaw out of the apprentices den, ready to find out exactly what was going on and if any progressions were being made to find the three kits.

To my disappointment, the many cats that were stirring in camp didn't seem to be moving as urgently as they could be, as if they had already looked in every place possible and were beginning to give up hope.

But it also looked like a good chunk of cats were missing. *Hopefully a search patrol?*

Snowpaw, who was now leading our little group of apprentices, gasped and turned around to face the rest of us as she nodded towards the Highledge. "There's Firestar!" she exclaimed, lashing her tail towards the ginger ThunderClan leader. "Let's ask him if we can do anything!"

Cherrypaw nodded eagerly in agreement. "Perfect! Let's go!"

Just as I was about to mumble agreement and follow Molepaw, Cherrypaw and Snowpaw, I hissed, batting at my own ear as I felt the all-too familiar nick make its lovely appearance, giving me my usual reality check.

Holy foxdung, what are you thinking? I asked myself, hissing with contempt. I stopped in my tracks and instantly sat down, annoyed by how flighty I had been since I'd woken up. *How soft would I look showing so much care towards some kits who probably just wandered off into the forest?*

I then huffed as I glanced at the three apprentices I had been walking behind. *And I'm going to be a warrior tomorrow! I am so far beyond this.*

As much as I hoped that the other apprentices wouldn't even notice I had stopped, Cherrypaw happened to glance over her shoulder slightly. She stopped and slowly turned around to face me, her eyes wide with concern.

"Are you coming, Swiftpaw?" the ginger tabby she-cat mewed, tilting her head to the side as her eyebrows raised.

I screwed my eyes shut, ruthlessly trying to force down my aggravation. Why did Cherrypaw have to make this into such a big deal? *If Snowpaw is right about Cherrypaw liking me, can Cherrypaw at least not be so aware of my presence all of the time?*

As much as I had learned from Ashfur, I still hadn't quite mastered how to explain myself when I backed out of certain tasks. I shrugged, letting my gaze flit around the camp. "Well... I-" I stammered. "No, I'm not."

My heart then nearly skipped a beat as Snowpaw then stopped in her tracks. Her white head quickly whipped around, revealing her eyes that were narrowed as they gleamed with suspicion.

"Is that so?" she muttered tautly as she turned around at an ominously slow pace. "Why not?"

I forced myself from taking a step back, as I was actually greatly intimidated by Snowpaw's current stance. She wasn't an intimidating cat by any means, so I knew that I must have really been rubbing her fur the wrong way. "Well, you see-" I finally began to answer, actually not having much of an idea of what my excuse would be.

Almost luckily, Snowpaw didn't let me finish. "You can't be serious right now," she growled, shouldering her way past Cherrypaw and Molepaw so that she was almost nose to nose with me. "There are kits less than a moon old *missing*, and you're not going to bother helping?"

"I-" I tried to reply.

"No!" Snowpaw exclaimed, cutting me off once more. "There's no excuse, Swiftpaw. How could you-"

This time, it was Snowpaw that was interrupted as gasps and yowls of what sounded like triumph suddenly rippled through the ThunderClan camp.

The beginnings of what could've been a quarrel suddenly forgotten, Snowpaw and I exchanged a nervous glance before looking towards the camp entrance.

It appeared as if the kits had been found, and I couldn't help but feel a small twinge of relief as Brambleclaw crawled through the gorse tunnel carrying Lightningkit, Cloudtail carrying Wrenkit, and Goldenshine carrying Emberkit. All three kits looked soaked, their fur plastered to their little bodies as they all shivered.

"Oh my goodness," I heard Cherrypaw breath as she padded up to stand on my other side. "What in the name of StarClan happened? Did they fall into the lake?"

"I assume so," I murmured, my gaze following the arriving cats as they ran towards the medicine den where Jayfeather was already waiting. *If we're looking at the kit timeline, this is about the period where curiosity brings them to the point of danger,* I thought, shaking my head slowly.

I then felt a slight pang of sympathy as my eyes fell on my mother carrying Emberkit. I was confused to see that her gray eyes seemed to be glinting with horror and grief. As I then scanned over the rest of the patrol, I realized that they looked exactly the same - ruffled and practically traumatized.

They found the kits, and they're just cold... so what could possibly have happened? My curiosity was so great that I was almost tempted to walk up to Goldenshine and press her with questions, even despite our quarrel.

But after taking one pawstep, I stopped, then returning that paw to where it had been. *If* she *wants to talk to* me *is also questionable,* I thought. *I don't expect her to like me much after pushing her aside and storming out of camp that one night...*

And I would never know what could have happened if I'd actually gone up to speak to Goldenshine, because the scene further unfolded in front of me as another group of cats suddenly arrived.

Thornclaw and Whitewing were making their way in, Lilypetal in between the two of them as they seemed to be guiding her. The brown tabby-and-white she-cat looked absolutely exhausted, and her eyes were glossed over as if she were in a daze.

But as I processed this, it only left me more confused. *In the words of Cherrypaw, what in the name of StarClan happened?*

I continued to stand with Cherrypaw, Snowpaw, and Molepaw, watching in silence as Firestar leaped down from the Highledge, where he had been overseeing the search. He approached Thornclaw, Lilypetal and Whitewing as they slowly walked deeper into camp.

The ThunderClan leader was clearly very worried as he addressed the three cats. "I see that the kits were found," he observed, briefly nodding towards the medicine den. "Where were they? Did you find Mistpelt as well?"

Mistpelt? I repeated to myself. *Was she missing too?*

After exchanging a nervous glance with Cherrypaw, I looked back towards the Highledge to catch Lilypetal hanging her head down as she let out a small whimper, seemingly at a loss for words.

I narrowed my eyes at this sight. *Oh, no.*

Whitewing stepped forward to answer as Thornclaw tried to sooth

Lilypetal, licking her head comfortingly. "I can't be sure..." the white she-cat began, still looking appalled by the situation. "But I think that the kits wandered onto the lake and fell through the ice..."

I took a step closer to the four cats, desperate to hear every word as Whitewing continued. "...and Mistpelt tried to save them, but she drowned herself. Lilypetal was there, but she didn't have the strength to pull her up," she meowed in a voice just barely above a whisper. She then hung her head low, just barely mumbling, "Her body hasn't been found."

I flicked my ears, my eyes widening at this news. *Great StarClan!*

Firestar's eyes widened with bewilderment, and the cats close by let out yowls of shock and grief. The leader seemed to be processing Whitewing's words for many moments, slowly closing his eyes and lowering his head as he clearly fought his own grief.

Eventually, he opened his green eyes again and nodded his head towards the medicine den. "Take Lilypetal to the medicine den. She needs strength as soon as possible," Firestar commanded, his voice firm. He then turned to face the rest of his Clan. "Mistpelt may not be here, but we shall hold a vigil for her."

With those words, the cats of ThunderClan began to gather and settle down in the middle of camp, some looking down at the ground as they were overwhelmed with the sense of loss, and some looking up at Silverpelt, possibly searching for Mistpelt among the stars already.

I heard a long sigh come from next to me, and I turned my head slightly to see that Cherrypaw was doing the latter. "I can't believe this," she whispered, then screwing her eyes shut as she lowered her head. "This... this is so sad." Without another word, Cherrypaw then stood up, padding forward to lie next to Poppyfrost.

I then turned the other way as I felt a tail touch my shoulder, and I met the sympathetic gaze of Snowpaw. "I'm so sorry..." she meowed softly as her head shook back and forth.

I blinked, baffled by Snowpaw's words. "What do you mean?" I

murmured.

Snowpaw's eyes flashed with shock for just a heartbeat before they softened once again. "Well... Mistpelt was your kin," she answered, shrugging. "She was Lilypetal's mother, who is Goldenshine's mother..."

"Oh, yeah..." I breathed, actually not fully realizing that until Snowpaw had pointed it out to me. *She is my kin... and I never got to know her very well at all.* "Thanks."

Snowpaw simply dipped her head to me in response before turning to join the vigil, her tail dragging on the snow as it drooped down. Just as she settled down, Firestar was beginning to speak.

"Mistpelt was truly an incredible cat," the ThunderClan leader meowed clearly as he too looked up at Silverpelt. "She wasn't even clan-born, actually having come from the Twolegplace when she joined the Clan. But she fought in the BloodClan battle, dedicated herself, and journeyed back here to the lake to find us as if she carried a warrior's blood. She..."

Firestar's words slowly faded from earshot as I padded away from the group of cats. My heart truly felt heavy with this loss, and as Firestar had said, Mistpelt was truly a cat to admire, but I knew very well that partaking in a vigil was something that I didn't need to be doing. *I* was sad, wasn't that enough? Why did I need to share grief with other cats?

So, I decided that I wouldn't completely seclude myself, but lie down in a spot just outside of the apprentices den that was pretty far away. From where I was, I could see that Snowpaw's gaze had followed me as I traveled, and she stared coldly back at me as she sat down. Cherrypaw, who was near her, seemed to be casting me concerned sidelong glances.

For a moment, I actually felt slight resentment towards what I was doing, but immediately brushed it off as I lied my head down on top of my paws. *Who cares what they think?* I said to myself as I closed my eyes. *I certainly don't. I shouldn't.*

I then sighed, hoping that I'd be able to get an ample amount of sleep before my big day tomorrow. To my luck, I already seemed to be drifting off into sleep just moments after I shut my eyes.

So, I nearly flinched as a cat's breath suddenly felt like it was blowing into my ear. *So, what do you think?*

I took a deep breath, recollecting myself as I realized that it was just Ashfur speaking to me. *What do I think?* I repeated back to my Dark Forest mentor, confused. *What do you mean?*

What do you mean, what do you mean? Ashfur replied, his voice full of a baleful sort of laughter. *How else do you think those kits were lured away from camp, you mouse-brain?*

Chapter 24

[image]

Goldenshine's POV

My heart felt like it was almost physically weighing me down as I followed Brambleclaw into the medicine den. Emberkit, who I was carrying, had been shivering so much that I thought she would shake herself right out of my jaws. I could hear Wrenkit coughing and wheezing from behind me.

I screwed my eyes shut, feeling extremely overwhelmed with everything that had just happened. Mistpelt's death had only occurred *moments* ago, but the amount of grief and worry I held currently was enough to be built up throughout an entire lifetime.

And losing Mistpelt was too much to bear already; now the lives of more of my kin were at stake. Mistpelt had managed to save Lightningkit, Emberkit and Wrenkit, but they had all initially fallen into the water. *Ice cold* water. And they were kits. *The cold could conquer them before they even have the chance to conquer it!*

And Lilypetal had pushed herself far beyond her limits, so far that she hadn't even been able to save her mother from drowning.

I watched anxiously as Jayfeather quickly gathered together a nest for the kits. I prayed to StarClan that the moons and moons of training that this medicine cat had received wouldn't fail him now.

Jayfeather then turned away from Brambleclaw, Cloudtail and me as he flicked his tail towards the clump of moss he'd just gathered together. "Put the kits there," he commanded as he arrived at his herb stock. Then, as the three of us complied, he slightly turned his head back and asked, "What happened?"

"These mouse-brained little furballs were found out on the lake," Cloudtail began to explain after he put Wrenkit down. "Mistpelt saved them..." The white tom then trailed off, clearly reluctant to

share the next piece of information.

I flashed the older warrior an appreciative look before deciding to continue for him. "Mistpelt saved them at the cost of her own life, just as a true warrior would," I meowed, my voice shaking the more that I spoke. I then glanced down at the three shivering kits. "All three of them surely would have drowned if it wasn't for her."

For a few heartbeats, Jayfeather didn't say a word, simply sighing and closing his eyes as he shook his head slowly. "She'll be happy and young again up in StarClan," was all he said in reply.

"For sure," I whispered just as the sound of a new set of pawsteps came from the den entrance. I turned around to see the light brown tabby pelt of Leafpool.

"Jayfeather, start gathering some more moss for another nest," the former medicine cat commanded. "Thornclaw, Whitewing and Lilypetal are on their way in."

I then raised my eyebrows in surprise as I heard Jayfeather let out a hiss. His eyes were blazing as he turned to face Leafpool. "You may be an extra set of paws, but don't forget, you're not my mentor anymore!"

"Jayfeather!" I exclaimed without thinking. "Now is not the time!" *For once, I'd like you to put your own personal issues aside to make my mother a gosh darn nest!*

Luckily, Leafpool didn't seem to want to deal with Jayfeather's bitterness either. She simply shook her head as she made her way past her son, taking it upon herself to gather some moss.

And thank StarClan, Leafpool had just finished with the second nest once Lilypetal arrived, Thornclaw and Whitewing still helping her to stand up and walk. My heart nearly broke as Lilypetal practically fell into her nest, as if she didn't even have one sliver of strength left in her body.

I then exchanged an anxious glance with my father as he sat in between the kits and Lilypetal. "*Well?*" Thornclaw then asked

worriedly, his eyes wide and his tail twitching as he turned to face Leafpool and Jayfeather. "What are you going to do for them? Are they going to be okay?"

"Well, we aren't going to be able to do *anything* until this den clears out," Jayfeather muttered, flitting his gaze over the many cats in the den as if he could see. "Some of you need to leave."

Great StarClan... I thought as I rolled my eyes.

I averted my glance towards Brambleclaw as I heard him let out a half-amused, half-annoyed huff. He exchanged a glance with Cloudtail before meowing, "We hear you." He then turned and headed towards the bramble sheet, beckoning for the white warrior to follow.

Thornclaw watched them go, then whipping his back around to look at the medicine cats once again. "Great, you've kicked out a couple of warriors," he meowed, his voice full of contempt and impatience, but his next words nearly rose up into a fearful yowl. "Now *do* something!"

Leafpool flashed the golden tabby warrior a sympathetic look. "We're gathering the herbs we need right now, Thornclaw," she reassured him before nodding to the nest that the kits were in. "They need to get warm as soon as possible. Can someone-"

I quickly nodded my head to the former medicine cat, already figuring what needed to be done. "I'm on in," I murmured as I lowered myself down to curl my body around the three wet bundles. I was glad to see that they immediately shifted themselves so that they were pressed up against me.

Next to me, I could see that Thornclaw was curling himself around his mate, rubbing his muzzle comfortingly against her cheek as she shivered.

I wonder if she's shivering from the cold, from her weakness, or from this overwhelming situation? I asked myself, glancing worriedly at Lilypetal for just a heartbeat. *Whatever it is, I hate to see my usually spirited, optimistic, brave mother look this way. So weak and helpless...*

"Lick their fur the wrong way," Jayfeather meowed, interrupting my thoughts as he nodded to me. "That will get them dry more quickly."

I nodded to acknowledge the medicine cat's words, then bent down and urgently began to lick each kit's fur. At first, each of them cringed with my touch, but the more I brushed my tongue over their fur, the smaller that their shivers became. By the time that I had finished off Wrenkit, they all nearly seemed to be asleep.

I couldn't help but well up with tenderness as I pulled the kits closer to me with my tail and stared down at them. *Who knew that one day I'd have another set of siblings sleeping at my flank?* I thought, a purr rumbling in my throat. *My own little brothers and sister...*

I let out a satisfied sigh before turning back to look at where my parents were settled in. Lilypetal's eyes were closed, but it was obvious that she was still awake by the shallow, quick rise and falls of her flank and by the way she shivered. Every few heartbeats she tried to adjust herself as if no possible position in existence was going to be comfortable for her, even with Thornclaw right next to her.

Thornclaw seemed to notice this too, sighing as he watched Leafpool lightly tap Lilypetal's shoulder with her tail. My mother weakly lifted her head, slowly blinking her eyes back open. "Hm?" was all that she seemed to be able to manage to say as she looked up at Leafpool.

I then watched as Leafpool dropped a couple of leaves in front of Lilypetal's muzzle. "This is thyme," Leafpool explained softly as she ran her tail down Lilypetal's flank. "It will help to calm you."

"Oh, Leafpool, thank you, but I-"

I then suppressed a purr of amusement as Thornclaw touched his nose to his mate's ear. "'*But*' absolutely nothing!" my father insisted, then nodding his head to the herbs Leafpool had delivered. "Please," he then pleaded as he looked softly at Lilypetal.

"I know that you're grieving greatly, and I'm sure that it feels like

nothing will help," Leafpool prompted as she pushed the herbs closer to Lilypetal, "But you have to start somewhere."

I nodded eagerly in agreement, trying to meet Lilypetal's gaze. I was happy to see that once my eyes were able to lock with hers, the dullness of my mother's eyes was already beginning to go away. "It can only go up from here, right?" I whispered.

For a moment, Lilypetal still seemed to be somewhere else, drowning in her own thoughts before she finally took a deep breath and licked up the herbs. I exchanged a relieved glance with Thornclaw once we were sure she was actually eating them.

"Oh, goodness. Come on," Lilypetal purred weakly as she finished the last of the herbs. "You all overestimate me. I'm not *that* stubborn, am I?"

Thornclaw snorted. "I would definitely say that you've been stubborn in at least a few situations," the golden brown tabby tom meowed sarcastically.

I then couldn't help but feel my heart warm up a little bit as Lilypetal sniffed and rolled her eyes. "So *rude*," she teased, then flicking her gaze towards Leafpool, her eyes continuing to look lighter. "Thank you," she meowed softly before shifting her gaze to Thornclaw, and then me. "Thank you all."

I flashed my mother a warm look, dipping my head as I then watched her sigh and lean into Thornclaw, her eyes closing once again. Her breaths were already beginning to slow as she quickly was pulled into a slumber, and I was happy to see that she had stopped shivering.

Thornclaw stared lovingly down at her sleeping figure for a few heartbeats before looking up at Leafpool and Jayfeather. "She'll be alright, won't she?"

My heartbeat quickened in anticipation of the answer to that question, but I was immediately able to relax even just seeing the gleam of satisfaction and ease in Leafpool's eyes. *Jayfeather however... he never really gives anything away, does he?* I thought

bitterly. *Especially the answers to burning questions like "why has my sister come back to life?", or "why has my son turned into a heartless demon?"*

"She will be just fine," Leafpool replied, who cut off my thoughts. Probably for the best. "She already seems to be in much better spirits."

"And the kits?" Thornclaw pressed after another relieved sigh.

Leafpool glanced over to where the kits and I were settled, letting out an almost inaudible grunt. "Hm, well, let's see," she murmured, padding up to me and peering over my flank with narrowed eyes. She then made her way around me and sniffed at Emberkit, Lightningkit, and then Wrenkit.

I could barely stand the wait for the prognosis. "Well?" I couldn't help but blurt out after several moments. *Mistpelt's death is certainly something, but I don't think I'd ever be able to lift my head up again if my siblings were to die under my care!*

Leafpool backed away just a pawstep, giving me a definitive nod in response. "They're already much warmer. Wonderful job, Goldenshine." Then, as the former medicine cat brushed past me, I felt her lightly flick my ear with her tail. "You're good with kits. Have you ever thought about having more?"

My gaze then shot towards Jayfeather as I heard him snort. Although I knew he couldn't see it, I gave him a hard stare through narrowed eyes before returning to looking at Leafpool. "No," I then answered firmly to the she-cat as I pulled the kits closer to me with my tail. "But I will gladly stay here for the night and continue to keep them warm."

"-and I'll stay as well," Thornclaw meowed, then giving Jayfeather almost the exact same sort of hard stare I had given the medicine cat. "And there's nothing at all that you can say to me to get me out of here."

"Why would I want you out of here in the first place?" Jayfeather muttered, seemingly half to himself as he rolled his eyes. "You're

such a delight."

I sniffed, shaking my head slowly before slightly shifting myself to see what was going on outside. And almost as soon as I had, I regretted it. It made tonight's reality sink in all over again.

It was clear that despite the fact that Mistpelt's body had not been able to be recovered, ThunderClan was holding a vigil for her. Several cats were gathered in the center of camp, many of their heads hanging low as they lied beneath Silverpelt.

I almost felt guilty that I was in the medicine den, and not out there grieving for my lost kin with the others. But I instantly tried to push that guilt down, taking a quick glance at the cats I was currently with *in* the medicine den.

I'm sure that Mistpelt would be happy to see that I'm with my family. Her family, I convinced myself. *I'll send her a prayer before I go to sleep.*

I then shifted myself slightly to see if I could get a bigger gander at what was going on out in the clearing. And to my complete surprise, I could just barely see Swiftpaw by the apprentices den. But it wasn't a complete shocker; of course, he wasn't near any other cat.

And honestly, with the current look that was on his face, I don't think any cat would *want* to be near him.

My son's dark gray fur was slightly bristled out, his claws unsheathed as they sank down into the earth, and his blue-gray eyes seemed to be blaring with shock and anger.

My whiskers began to twitch curiously at this sight. Was he grieving and ruthlessly trying to hide it? Was he angry that he couldn't do anything about the situation?

I then sighed with weariness, finally breaking my gaze from where my son sat. *Who knows?* I thought to myself as strong feelings of distress began to creep up on me. *He constantly seems to be filled with so much hostility and rage that it could be anything...*

I then nearly let out a yelp as I felt something brush against my shoulder. I wrapped my tail more tightly around Wrenkit, Lightningkit and Emberkit as I whipped my head around. To my relief, it was just Jayfeather.

The gray tabby tom was looking down at me, his blind blue eyes flashing with sympathy and compassion for just a heartbeat. I hadn't said a word, but it was if he completely understood what was worrying me. I mean, beyond what was obvious.

I suddenly felt an overwhelming amount of gratitude, Jayfeather being a cat who typically didn't share his condolences very often. As he began to pad away, I quickly flicked his shoulder with my tail as a sign of appreciation before quickly returning it to where it had been wrapped around the kits.

Then, for several moments, there was a calm, serene silence in the medicine den, the only sounds being the quiet rustles of leaves as Jayfeather and Leafpool organized their herbs, and Lilypetal's soft breathing as she continued to sleep.

It was nice. Very nice. And *needed*. As much as talking is sometimes needed to get through tough situations, sometimes just the simple presence of those you care about is enough to help you make light of things.

This peaceful silence was still proceeding when a rustle came from the entrance to the medicine den. I looked up, my heart lifting, as I instantly recognized the sandy-gray muscular build of my mate. His pale blue gaze was glowing with so much concern and commiseration as he padded up to my nest.

I then closed my eyes, my heart continuing to warm up as Dustystorm then padded closer and rubbed his cheek against mine. "Oh, Goldenshine, I am so sorry," he whispered to me, meeting my gaze. "I... I wish I had the right words to say to you..."

I then quietly purred as I touched my nose to Dustystorm's. "Your presence is enough," I whispered to him. "Will you stay in here with me?"

Dustystorm then sighed as he shook his head slowly. "You really thought you were going to have to *ask* to get me to do that?" he teased to me, his gaze tender as he brushed past me. "Of course I will."

I then heard my mate purr with amusement as he curled himself around me. "I see you've managed to find a bit of a distraction before I even got here," he then murmured teasingly, his eyes full of humor as he flicked his tail towards where Emberkit, Lightningkit and Wrenkit were still curled up, fast asleep. "Would you still rather be dealing with a fox?"

"Goldenshine?"

Before I could even answer Dustystorm, I heard Briarlight's voice come from the other side of the den, and I turned to see the brown she-cat settled in her usual sleeping spot. "If you and Dustystorm are about to go to sleep, I can take over caring for the kits, if you'd like?" she asked kindly, her head tilting to the side.

I thought for a moment before shaking my head to the young she-cat. "Thank you for offering, Briarlight," I replied, briefly taking another glance at the three small sleeping figures, "But... but that's alright. I'm happy to keep them right here."

Briarlight nodded as her mouth opened up into a yawn. "Alright," she whispered, then lowering her head down into her nest. "Let me know if you change your mind."

I then found that I couldn't separate my gaze from my drowsy trio of siblings. *Oh, I definitely won't be changing my mind...*

A purr then began to rumble in my throat as Dustystorm shifted himself closer to me, twinning his tail with mine as he rubbed his cheek against mine. I closed my eyes, taking in my mate's warm and familiar scent.

Dustystorm then pulled his head away, following my gaze as I continued to look down at my young kin. He then looked back at me, his eyes continuing to glow with humor and affection. "Hm, I think my question has definitely been answered," he teased to me.

I snorted and rolled my eyes in response, because yes, up until this point, battling one on one with a fox had seemed slightly less torturous to me than caring for a litter of kits...

But the feeling I had at the moment as I lied there with Dustystorm, the three little kits pressed at my flank, I wondered if maybe one day... *someday* in the distant future... I *would* want to have kits with him.

Chapter 25

[image]

Swiftpaw's POV

How else do you think those kits were lured away from camp, you mouse-brain?

These words continued to be an echo in my head as my eyes flew open. I lifted my head slightly to see that my nest looked ruffled, as if I had adjusted myself and moved around several times.

Well, that was because I had, I suppose. Since I had returned to the medicine den after Mistpelt's vigil, it felt as if I had spent countless moons trying to go to sleep. But it felt impossible. What Ashfur had revealed to me just as I had settled down a little ways away from the vigil had made me feel physically sick. *Lilypetal's three kits nearly drowning in the lake, and Mistpelt... it was all Ashfur's fault,* I reflected. *Why did he even do it in the first place? Could I have prevented this?*

That question, and its possible answer, was too much to even fathom. *No*, I tried to tell myself. *No way. I didn't even know about it, so what could I have done?*

Ashfur's words had been too much for me to bear. I didn't even know what it made me feel... all I knew was that being in the presence of Mistpelt's vigil was going to be too difficult for me to stand anymore. I could feel the gazes of at least a few cats burning into me as I had stormed into the medicine den, but I didn't care. I needed to be alone. No cat could know the truth of this situation, this information that I was sure I was going to have to hide.

I was then that I had tried to fall asleep, attempting to forget about the happenings of last night. I had hoped that maybe I would wake up, and it would have all left my mind, and Ashfur would never bring it up again. But the fact that I hadn't been able to even sleep didn't help matters.

It appeared as if I had managed to sleep for just a little while though, but I might as well have just spent more time tossing and turning, because I felt just as drained, uncomfortable and exhausted as I had been before I dozed off. And unfortunately, my Dark Forest mentor's words were still as fresh in my head as a caught piece of prey.

I turned on my other side as I let out a quiet huff, knowing full well that I wasn't going to be able to sleep again. I had never felt like so much was weighing on my mind. I didn't know how in the name of StarClan I was going to handle it.

I lifted my head up and scanned around the den, and it appeared that my denmates had also returned to their nests at some point during the night. Snowpaw was curled up into her usual tight ball, her eyebrows furrowed as she seemed to be in a very light, uncomfortable sleep. Molepaw was lying on his belly with his head over his paws. Cherrypaw was curled up similarly to how Snowpaw was, but her tail was draped over her closed eyes, almost as if it were assisting her in keeping her asleep.

I couldn't help but lightly purr with amusement at this sight. *That's cute.*

I then sighed, my head falling back onto the soft moss as another wave of dread and discomfort ran through me, reminding me of the current circumstances. *I don't know how I'm going to stand being around my Clanmates when I'm carrying this... this horrible knowledge*, I realized as I quietly stirred once again. *It's sucking the fun out of the fact that I'm going to be a warrior today.*

My eyes then widened, the first time this thought having crossed my mind. *I'm going to be a warrior today...* I repeated, my head shaking quickly as I stood up. *That is what should be first on my mind.*

I then began to quietly pad out of the apprentices den. *What's done is done. There's nothing I could have done about it, so I'm not going to dwell on it,* I told myself as I crawled out into the now empty ThunderClan camp clearing. It was still as dark as night up in the sky, but I could tell that dawn was not far ahead.

I paused for just a moment, taking a glance back and forth before beginning to pad towards the gorse tunnel, deciding that I was going to leave camp for just a little while. *I don't want to be in my own head during my warrior ceremony later*, I thought. *Ashfur won't criticize me for taking a walk, surely?*

I slowly and quietly made my way across camp, praying to StarClan that no cat would bother asking where I was going. Berrynose was on guard just beside the camp entrance, but I had no trouble simply ignoring the cream-colored tom, so that was what I planned to do. *Two stubborn cats certainly don't mix. We'd be bickering by that gorse tunnel until sunhigh.*

Just as I passed the medicine den, I gasped, completely startled as I nearly crashed into a flash of gray. I took a step back and shook my head quickly, ready to let whoever it was pass by.

But I was surprised to see the cat let out a hiss as it whipped its gray tabby head around. I sighed and rolled my eyes when I realized who it was. *Speaking of stubborn cats...*

"Great StarClan, cats who can actually see sure take it for granted, don't they?" Jayfeather muttered through gritted teeth, his blind blue gaze meeting mine. "Watch where you're going."

"Sorry," I murmured, shifting my paws back and forth uncomfortably.

I then felt a pang of nervousness as Jayfeather's eyes narrowed down into slits. "Where *are* you going?" The medicine cat asked, then nodding briefly to the medicine den. "Goldenshine, Lilypetal, Thornclaw and the kits are in there. Were you coming to see them?"

Huh, yeah, right, I joked to myself. *I hadn't even planned on that, and even if it had occurred to me, I wouldn't go through with it.* I shook my head in response to Jayfeather's question. "No, I wasn't. I was just heading out for a walk, actually..."

I then stood, having no idea what to do as Jayfeather seemed to stare at me as if he could see, for many, *many* unbearable moments. I felt like simply walking past him or breaking into whatever he was

thinking would be a death wish.

I then raised my eyebrows and flicked my ears, baffled as the medicine cat suddenly turned around and headed for the camp entrance. "I'm going to collect herbs," he meowed just loudly enough for me to hear. "You will walk with me."

I will *walk with you?* I repeated in my mind, surprised by Jayfeather's assertiveness. But despite that, I didn't say no, not even wanting to bother trying to see what the consequences of that would be. *If I thought that saying "no" to Ashfur would be bad...*

I let out an annoyed huff, frustrated by this situation I was being pulled into as I trotted up to walk just behind the medicine cat. I tried my best to ignore Berrynose's burning gaze as I crawled into the gorse tunnel and followed Jayfeather out into the forest. The medicine cat was keeping his pace fairly quick; it took me a moment to catch up with him as he padded deeper into the trees.

Our surroundings were creepily silent thanks to the circumstances brought on by leaf-bare; lack of prey meant the stirs of small creatures in the grass and bushes were missing, the frozen lake resulted in a lack of splashes and ripples from the water, and the leaves having fallen off of the trees moons ago meant that the wind couldn't rustle them. The only sounds my ears were processing were the small crunches of the snow as Jayfeather and I walked side by side. The medicine cat almost looked like a reflection, for we were pretty much the same height now.

We walked in complete silence for many heartbeats. I turned my head slightly from where I had been looking ahead to see that the tabby tom's head was raised with his mouth open slightly, and I assumed that he was trying to catch the scents of the specific herbs he needed.

I'm certainly not going to be of any help. "What are you looking for?" I decided to ask, breaking the silence that was steadily beginning to become awkward the longer it lasted.

Jayfeather closed his mouth, quickening his pace as he seemed to catch wind of something. "I need strengthening herbs for Lilypetal,"

the medicine cat answered as he padded up to a bush and began to sniff at the leaves. "She brought her strength right back to where it started when she burst out of camp to look for her kits."

Her kits, I thought to myself, an overwhelming wave of guilt rushing through me once again. *The kits that Ashfur lured out of the camp himself...* I then screwed my eyes shut and shook my head, thankful that Jayfeather wouldn't be able to see my nervous mannerisms. *Stop it. Just because Jayfeather is here with you doesn't mean that you can't still use this time to clear your head, so do that.*

Not knowing what I could possibly say to Jayfeather in response, I simply sat in silence as I watched the tom collect these "strengthening herbs". And the more I sat there, the more I wondered why I was even there in the first place. I assumed that Jayfeather, prickly but incredibly wise as well, would know that I have no experience as a medicine cat whatsoever. And knowing Jayfeather, he would typically see another cat coming with him on a quick expedition like this as simply a burr in his fur.

Almost as if the gray tabby tom could hear my thoughts, he suddenly put down the herbs he had been collecting and turned to face me, his blue gaze surprisingly very solemn as he looked back at me. "You're becoming a warrior today, correct?" He muttered, his eyes narrowing.

I blinked a couple of times, thrown off guard by the random question. Was this just a means of making conversation? Surely Jayfeather wouldn't take the time to simply catch up with an apprentice? "Yes..." I replied hesitantly, still utterly confused. "Yes, I am."

"I see," Jayfeather replied, beginning to push all of the herbs he had collected into a single pile. "I'm sure that took lots of hard work."

I nodded slowly, my eyes narrowing to reflect the medicine cat's expression. "Well, yes. It definitely did," I answered. "But I am ready. I couldn't be more ready."

I then raised my eyebrows as Jayfeather let out a contemptuous grunt. Before I could question him, he muttered, "Well, with the

training you've been getting, I'm certainly not surprised that you have that attitude."

I opened my mouth to give Jayfeather some sort of snarky reply, but nothing would come out. I then closed it as my eyes screwed shut, remembering all of the things that this tom knew about me. For just a heartbeat, I had assumed that Jayfeather was referring to my training with Foxleap. No. He *knew* that I was training in the Dark Forest. *Thanks to Ivypool and that big mouth of hers,* I thought bitterly. *Somehow I've been able to admire her beyond that.*

I then pushed away my thoughts of the silver tabby-and-white tabby she-cat, knowing that I needed to decide how to respond to Jayfeather's very cryptic statement. As wrong as the choice may have been, I decided to try and play dumb. "Well, I would hope that Foxleap has given me the confidence that I need in order to become a warrior."

As I figured it would, the "playing dumb" attempt didn't work. "Nice try," Jayfeather muttered, pushing his herbs to the side and then taking a step closer to me. "Foxleap has hardly contributed to the cat that you've become."

"Excuse me?" I meowed with bewilderment, my eyes widening.

Jayfeather sighed as he shook his head. "Foxleap didn't create this tom that cats are scared to be around," he answered firmly.

Scared to be around? I repeated in my head, trying to ignore the small pang of remorse that I felt. Luckily, it didn't last, and I was able to spit back at the medicine cat. "Foxleap was my mentor!" I hissed defensively.

"But not your only one."

I let out a huff as I closed my eyes. I knew that there was no use beating around the bush anymore. "Listen, I'm not the only cat living around this lake that trains in the Dark Forest," I muttered sharply.

"Sure," Jayfeather replied, shrugging. But his gaze grew dark again

as he then meowed, "But others don't let that training bleed out into their Clan lives."

"What? That's exactly what they're supposed to do!" I insisted, growing extremely frustrated. I had no idea what this mouse-brain was trying to prove to me. "What else would the training be for?"

"Fighting moves, Swiftpaw," Jayfeather muttered, his blind gaze practically burning into mine. "They learn fighting moves."

I narrowed my eyes once more, somewhat confused by that answer. "Okay... " I murmured. I then shook my head quickly as I figured out how to worm my way around the medicine cat's words. "Yes, I learn fighting moves, exactly. So, what's wrong with using what I've learned in the Dark Forest?"

"Your integration of what you've learned in the Dark Forest goes way beyond fighting moves," Jayfeather meowed in a grim voice that would send a chill down any cat's spine.

But even so, I really wasn't wanting to give a bird's chirp about what he was saying. Why he was taking my training with Ashfur as such a negative was driving me up a tree. Yes, there had maybe been some ill intent initially, but how could I still assume that when he had done so much for me? "So?" I responded to Jayfeather, my unsheathed claws digging into the ground. "If anything, that's-"

I then had to step aside as Jayfeather stood up and brushed past me. "-and that's not a good thing," the medicine cat murmured, cutting me off. "It's about time you got a grip of what's falling down all around you. What you're losing. Who you're hurting." He then paused in his walk for just a moment as his head turned slightly to look at me. "You've become blind to what's most important."

Then, as Jayfeather turned and continued to walk away, I simply stood in the same place, having no idea what I could say back.... or even what to think. I found that I could only stare down at the ground. *How have I become blind to what's important? What have I lost?* I wondered as I lightly pawed at some snow.

"Come on, I need to grab some poppy seeds next," Jayfeather called

back to me, interrupting my thoughts. "The sun will be up soon, and you wouldn't want to miss your warrior ceremony, would you?"

I simply stood up and began to follow the medicine cat. "No, I definitely wouldn't," I breathed as I padded up to trail behind Jayfeather.

~>~>~>~>~>~>~>~

Firestar's words were ringing out in the ThunderClan camp just as Jayfeather and I were emerging through the gorse tunnel. "All cats old enough to catch their own prey, gather here beneath the Highledge!"

I stopped in my tracks, realizing that we had arrived back just in the nick of time. This was my warrior ceremony. *Within moments, I'm going to be a ThunderClan warrior...*

I stayed where I was and watched as my Clanmates emerged from their dens, stopped mid-meal, or cut off their conversations to convene under the huge rock. I then flicked my ears as I noticed Jayfeather walking past me, heading back towards the medicine den with all of the herbs he had collected. He then paused for a moment, giving me a curt nod. He didn't say a word, yet his gaze seemed to be saying so much. I barely got to process it though, as the medicine cat immediately turned back around after his brief gesture.

I sighed with exasperation, then decided that I needed to join in the gathering. Unfortunately the walk out in the forest hadn't helped me to accomplish what I was seeking. In fact, my mind felt just as foggy and discombobulated as it had before. I settled down next to my mentor, Foxleap, who I actually was able to exchange an excited glance with as I met his gaze.

"Well, Swiftpaw?" The tawny warrior prompted, nudging me on the shoulder. "How are you? Are you ready for this?"

I shrugged as I purred with amusement. "Ready as I'll ever be." *At least... I think I am.*

I then turned my head to take a glance at all of the cats beginning to gather around, and at this point, that was a lot. I felt a pang of nerves as I realized that the ceremony was going to begin at any moment. Luckily, the atmosphere already felt much lighter compared to last night. I could definitely sense some of the sadness and grief that still lingered with Mistpelt's death, but for whatever reason, I suppose that gathering and ceremonies always brought Clan cats a little joy.

I then lashed my tail as I noticed Snowpaw emerging from the apprentices den. Her blue eyes were bright and eager, and I honestly don't think she could have looked more excited if she tried. As she trotted up to the clearing, her pawsteps were so light that it practically looked like she was walking on air. My heart then nearly skipped a beat as her gaze met mine. For a moment, I actually thought that the white she-cat was going to run up and sit by me, but instead, she almost immediately broke her gaze and settled down next to Icecloud a few fox-lengths away.

I tried to push down the immense amount of regret that was trying to well up inside of me. *Hm, her loss,* I thought bitterly as I returned to looking up at the Highledge where Firestar was staring down at the gathering cats.

It was a few heartbeats after that that the camp finally fell silent, allowing the ThunderClan leader to begin. I could barely stand the amount of excitement I was beginning to feel as he projected his voice out to the clearing.

"Cats of ThunderClan," Firestar meowed clearly, "I'm sure we can all agree that last night was a very tough one for each and every one of us. We lost a very honorable warrior. One that has served us for many moons."

I turned my head slightly to see some cats lower their heads for just a few heartbeats, grieving for the lost Mistpelt, before waiting for Firestar to continue. The ThunderClan leader's eyes, that had just been glowing with sadness, now seemed to be glittering with immense pride. "One way that our Clan is always able to bring some light after such a horrible loss is through the creation of some more honorable warriors." My tail then began to twitch with eagerness as

Firestar lowered his head, his gaze flitting to Snowpaw, and then me. "Snowpaw, Swiftpaw, will you please step forward?"

Here we go.

I dipped my head to Firestar, keeping my gaze on him as I took a few pawsteps forward until I was standing just under the Highledge. Just a moment later, Snowpaw was right next to me. As much as I knew that she was only standing there because she was supposed to, I was so tempted to pretend that our conflict was all just a bad dream, and that we were standing by each other as best friends, because we wanted to.

I then straightened my posture as Firestar finally leaped down from the Highledge to stand in front of the two of us. He gave Snowpaw and me a brief nod before lifting his head to look at the sky. "I, Firestar, leader of ThunderClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on these two apprentices. They have trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend them to you as warriors in their turn."

The ginger tom then averted his gaze to flit over Snowpaw and I back and forth. "Snowpaw and Swiftpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

Snowpaw replied instantly, her voice ringing clearly throughout the camp. "I do."

As I was about to answer, I swore I could feel the gazes of many cats burning into me. Jayfeather was one, I was almost sure. Ivypool, too. I could have guessed that they were going to doubt the sincerity of what I was going to say. "I do as well," I meowed to Firestar, dipping my head to him.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior names," Firestar then replied, these words I had heard being presented to other warriors countless times already sending a chill down my spine. Now, it was being told to me.

First, the leader turned to face Snowpaw. "Snowpaw, from this

moment on you will be known as Snowstorm. StarClan honors you for your integrity and determination, and we welcome you as a full warrior of ThunderClan."

My mouth dropped open as I looked back at Snowstorm, and I was happy to see that she returned it, her eyes wide with enthusiasm. *Snowstorm is a really neat name*, I couldn't help but think. *That suits her.*

"And Swiftpaw," Firestar then meowed, pulling my attention back to him. "From this moment on you will be known as Swiftflight. StarClan honors you for your strength and bravery, and we welcome you as a full warrior of ThunderClan."

"Snowstorm! Swiftflight! Snowstorm! Swiftflight!"

Swiftflight, I thought as Firestar briefly touched his muzzle to my head. *Not too shabby.* Then, as I licked the ThunderClan leader's shoulder, something occurred to me. *Does my "flight" in my name come from Goldenshine's sister? Snowflight?*

I then flashed an appreciative look to Firestar before turning around to look back at the gathered cats of ThunderClan. The first cat that caught my eye was my mother, Goldenshine, standing near the front next to Dustystorm and Nightwing. I actually felt my heart sink a little as I noticed that despite all that we had been through, it was still clear she was still happy and proud of me beneath her nearly unreadable gray gaze. And by the certain gleam in her eyes, I could tell that I had indeed been named after her late sister, Snowflight.

I sometimes do wonder if she wishes she had someone else as a son... I thought to myself. *A son that's actually willing to talk to her.* And then, my eyes went to Foxleap. *Does he actually feel as though he's fulfilled my training?* I then sighed as my gaze fell on Snowpaw, and then Molepaw and Cherrypaw. *Have they settled for second best by even taking the time to be around me?*

I then shook my head quickly, letting out an irritated growl as I padded forward to accept praise and murmurs of congratulations from my Clanmates. *Stop being so whiny and ridiculous*, I told myself.

You're a warrior now, and now nothing is holding you back from being a tough, strong warrior in this Clan, including these cats.

Exactly.

My ears pricked as Ashfur's voice suddenly rang in my head. *What?* I replied back.

You're exactly right, Ashfur answered. *You're a warrior. Your training is far from over, but now you can fully become the resilient and powerful cat that I've helped you become.*

As I gave my Dark Forest mentor a nod of acknowledgement, trying to force down my own questioning for the first time in a while, Ashfur then meowed firmly. *This is how it should be.*

Chapter 26

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

I closed my eyes and lifted my head slightly as the gentle, warm breeze brushed against my fur. I shifted my paws slightly and let myself enjoy the feel of the softness of the grass, which is something I never thought I'd miss so much.

I almost wished that I could've stayed like that forever - sitting, eyes closed as I relished in the huge thaw that had come about in just the past few days. With the warmth, the snow had all quickly melted away.

And the ice-covered lake had now been replaced with water, as it was during the other three seasons. The newleaf sun reflected beautifully against it. What was so awful was that I couldn't enjoy it at all. I wondered if I'd ever be able to stand the sight of the lake again.

Yet, here I was. But I was here with a purpose.

I sighed, internally fighting with myself to stay strong as I looked down at the small plant that was lying at my paws. Lavender.

I screwed my eyes shut, feeling like I had to look away and contain myself once more. *I can't do this,* I thought in dismay and grief. *I can't do it.*

I then lashed my tail and took a deep breath, forcing myself to look down at the small purple flower once again. *I have to do it.*

I bent my head down, gently clamping the lavender into my jaws. I felt my eyes well up with emotion and my chest fall almost physically heavy as the sweet but piercing scent flooded into my nose. It was a scent that had made me extremely happy until just a quarter moon ago, but now it was tainted with sorrow.

I slowly padded closer and closer to the lake, each step feeling more painful and dreaded than the next. I practically felt numb by the time that I came face to face with my reflection in the water. I could barely stand to see the evident gleam of sadness in my own hazel eyes.

So I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, attempting to contain myself again. *Lilypetal, you've waited to get this closure, and now you're getting it,* I told myself. I then let my eyes open as I thought, *make this worth the wait.*

Almost feeling like I had been given a brief bit of strength, I took one last step forward, lowered my head, and dropped my jaw slightly. I then felt the little strength I had dissolve as I watched the flower fall into the lake, sending small ripples of water in every direction. As the plant drifted farther and farther out, I felt my pain growing stronger and stronger, but in a way, so was the ease I had been missing.

I stared off at the floating bud for a few heartbeats before letting my eyes close yet again. "Hi, Mistpelt," I whispered out loud. "I know that you loved the smell of lavender. You pointed it out each time you found it in the forest..."

I then trailed off, feeling too heartbroken to continue on for a moment. "I know that your spirit still lingers here, so I thought I'd..." I trailed off once more. "I thought I'd send one your way."

My head then lowered to the ground as I spoke my next words. "I miss you so much," I meowed, my voice heavy with heartache. I then screwed my eyes shut again, forcing back the emotion that surged in them. "Oh, Mistpelt, I am so, so sorry." I then sat down, simply trying to relish in this extremely despairing, but needed moment.

This had been one of the first times since my kitting that I had been able to possess the physical ability to leave the camp on my own. Thanks to Jayfeather's strengthening herbs and lots of rest, I had been able to recover from my weakness quite quickly.

And since Mistpelt's death, all I had wanted to do was

commemorate her in some way. All I had been doing up until now was lie in the nursery or medicine den, having to appear strong while my heart felt as if it was being ripped to shreds from the inside. And having to cope with the fact that Mistpelt had gone to StarClan in the middle of our conflict, all because I had let it stay that way. *I will never forgive myself for letting things end the way that they did.*

The first thing that I had done after Jayfeather gave me the "all-clear" was run out into the forest, grab a piece of the budding lavender plants already growing amidst the arriving newleaf, and make my way to the lake. I had no idea if Mistpelt could see me, but I wanted more than anything to at least try and give her a proper goodbye, or rather, apology.

And even though I knew I would be hurting for moons to come, this small visit I had paid had given me the closure I was seeking. At least, I was trying to tell myself that it was. *This closure should have happened while she was alive...*

I let out a long sigh as I finally stood up, pushing myself to look up at the lake. "I will never forget how you gave your own life to save my kits," I whispered after several heartbeats. "And I hope you know that I forgive you. I should have a long time ago."

After those words, I forced myself to turn around and begin to walk away. *You could stand in front of this lake and talk about all of the things you wish you'd said all day,* I told myself. *All you can do now is move forward.*

Ironically, I stopped in my tracks just after that thought crossed my mind as something occurred to me. I almost felt my heart breaking all over again. *Oreo...* I thought grimly as I already begun to picture the look on my brother's face. *He still doesn't know, but he sure as heck deserves to.*

I then gave a definitive nod as I broke into a run, the shadows of the trees falling on my fur as I burst into the forest. *I need to tell him right now,* I decided. *But I'll make a stop at camp first to check in with Thornclaw and the kits, and make sure that it's okay with Firestar.*

I actually felt quite exhilarated as I ran through ThunderClan territory. It had felt like so long since I had been able to move at this speed, my fur being blown back against the wind, my paws pushing off of the soft ground, and me dodging bushes and trees as they came.

I skidded to a halt once I came to the gorse tunnel, and I shook my fur out before crawling into ThunderClan camp. I actually felt somewhat happy seeing the hustle and bustle of the clearing - a hunting patrol was gathering, just about to leave, a few pairs of cats were sharing tongues near the Highledge, and my heart lifted as I saw Thornclaw playing with the kits near the nursery. I padded up closer to see that it appeared that the four of them were partaking in quite the intense mock-battle.

"Intruder! Intruder!" Emberkit was yowling out as I came into earshot.

"We need to get him off of our territory!" Wrenkit demanded.

"But he's so big!" Lightningkit exclaimed as he stared wide-eyed up at his father.

Thornclaw's eyes were gleaming with humor as he hunched his back and let his fur bristle out slightly. "Yes, that's right," he meowed, crouching down even more. "I am a very big intruder that's hungry for some kits!"

Lightningkit and Emberkit gasped, while Wrenkit simply widened his eyes and flicked his ears.

I let out a quiet purr of amusement as I crouched down, copying Thornclaw's position and making my way to stand behind the three kits. "Make that two," I purred.

All three kits whipped their heads around.

"Mother!" Wrenkit exclaimed.

"You're back!" Lightningkit mewed.

"Yay!" Emberkit squeaked.

The three kits then let out excited squeals as they ran up to me and dug their heads into my flank. I stared lovingly down at Wrenkit, Lightningkit and Emberkit, wrapping my tail protectively around them as they took comfort in my fur.

I then snorted as I looked back up at Thornclaw, who was standing up and beginning to approach me. "Well, so much for me trying to be intimidating," I muttered jokingly to my mate.

"Trying? Come on, that position would have the fiercest warriors shaking down at your paws!" Thornclaw teased sarcastically, and I felt the golden tabby tom touch his muzzle to mine as I rolled my eyes. He lowered his voice down to a whisper as he then meowed, "Welcome back. How are you doing?"

I sighed as Thornclaw pulled away to meet my gaze. "I'm alright, thank you," I replied honestly, shaking my head slowly. "But... I've realized that there's something else that I need to do."

Thornclaw's eyebrows raised with intrigue. "And what's that?"

"I need to tell my brother the news," I answered to Thornclaw as I stood up, briefly nuzzling each kit's head with my nose before looking back up at my mate. "I don't want to keep it from him any longer."

For just a moment, Thornclaw's blue eyes seemed to flash with contempt at the thought of me going back to a Twoleg nest, but they were almost immediately replaced with worry and concern. "I understand," he murmured, brushing his tail along my flank. "Are you going by yourself again? Would you like me to come with you?"

Thornclaw seemed to be about to ask another question, but was interrupted by the alarmed gasps of Lightningkit, Emberkit, and Wrenkit as they ran up to him.

"You and mother are both leaving? Right in the middle of the attack?" Lightningkit asked, his yellow eyes wide as he looked up at his father.

"No!" Emberkit whined.

"We were going to come up with a defense strategy!" Wrenkit sighed, swiping at some dirt with one of his paws.

I purred with amusement as I looked back up at Thornclaw. "I don't think they're going to let you!" I purred, then touching my nose to my mate's. "Thank you, but that's alright. I'll let the kits spend some more time with their father."

I pulled away to meet Thornclaw's gaze full of affection and more worry at the same time. "Alright," he breathed in a half-conceding, half-amused tone. "But at least find someone to escort you."

"*Escort* me?" I repeated with laughter in my voice. "Thornclaw, I've traveled to the Twoleg nest by myself before! I used to *live* there, for StarClan's sake!"

Thornclaw stood up and took a step closer to me. "It's a long way away, and I want someone to be there with you if you start to get tired," he insisted, his eyes troubled. He then let his muzzle rest on my head as he meowed softly, "Please?"

A purr was rumbling in my throat as I then dug my head into Thornclaw's chest fur. "Oh, fine," I sighed, mocking annoyance. Then, after drinking in my mate's scent for a few heartbeats, I pulled away and gave him a lick on the cheek in farewell. "Goodbye! I'll see you in a little while!" I then turned to touch my nose to each of the kit's heads. "Goodbye, you three. I'll be back to play later!"

"*Later* is too long!" Emberkit whined as I turned away, but she seemed to get over her bitterness almost immediately as she turned back to Thornclaw, her paws kneading excitedly into the ground. "Okay! Where were we?"

The voices of Thornclaw and the kits slowly began to fade away as I padded towards the center of camp. I then paused, scanning my gaze around to look for the familiar flame-colored pelt of Firestar. I let out a small grunt of satisfaction as I caught him by the fresh-kill pile, sharing a meal with Graystripe. I approached the two older toms, dipping my head to them in greeting as they turned to face me.

"Hi, there, Lilypetal!" Graystripe meowed kindly.

"Did you need something?" Firestar then asked.

"I do, actually!" I replied. "Is now a bad time?"

Firestar exchanged a humored glanced with Graystripe before shaking his head to me. "Not at all, Lilypetal. Tell me what's going on."

"Okay, well..." I hesitated, worrying for a moment if Firestar would for some reason say no to my request. "I was wondering if I could possibly visit Oreo and give him the news?" I then sighed and shut my eyes for just a moment as another wave of grief ran through me. "I feel like I need to. Mistpelt was his mother, too."

"And he must know, Lilypetal, I agree," Firestar finished for me as he nodded his head slowly.

I let out a brief gasp of excitement and surprise. "Really?" I exclaimed. "Firestar, are you sure?"

"I am very sure. I trust that you won't tread around there longer than necessary," the ThunderClan leader replied as his green eyes glittered with understanding. "And I have to admit, if I were in the same position, I'd want to tell Princess news like that."

"It's likely *you* wouldn't have asked for permission, though," Graystripe teased to his best friend, nudging him lightly on the shoulder with his tail.

After purring with amusement at Graystripe's joke, I dipped my head as a gesture of appreciation to Firestar. "Oh, thank you, Firestar," I meowed before beginning to pad away. "I'll be back before the sun begins to set!"

"Hey, Lilypetal!"

I paused in my travel once again, turning to follow the voice and see the familiar sandy-gray pelt of my daughter's mate. "Hi, Dustystorm!" I meowed, dipping my head to him. "What's up?"

"Well, pardon me for overhearing..." Dustystorm began hesitantly as he gave me a shy look. "But I heard that you were looking for an escort?"

I narrowed my eyes and smirked as I looked back at the younger tom. "Did you, now?" I prompted, deciding to tease Dustystorm a little bit.

To my amusement, his eyes flashed with fear and alarm for a heartbeat as he took a step back. "I'm sorry!" he insisted, shaking his head quickly. "I didn't mean to eavesdrop! I just happened to be nearby, and... and-"

I then *mrrowed* with laughter, taking a step forward so that I could put the tip of my tail on Dustystorm's shoulder. "I'm just joking, Dustystorm. It's completely alright!" I purred, then beckoning him with my tail as I began to pad towards the camp entrance. "I'd love your company."

Dustystorm then closed his eyes as he sighed with relief. "Thank StarClan," he breathed, so quietly that I wondered if I was even supposed to hear it. He then opened his eyes again, his eyes excited and eager as he exclaimed, "Let's go!"

I exchanged a warm glance with Dustystorm before making my way through the tunnel and back out into the forest, the sandy tom right on my tail.

I then listened to Dustystorm's pawsteps on the grass as he quickened his pace to walk side by side with me. "So, you're going to see Oreo to tell him about..." he then trailed off, his eyes flashing with sympathy as he looked up at me. "Right?"

I raised my eyebrows, not being able to help but purr with amusement at Dustystorm's wariness. "About Mistpelt? Yes, I am," I replied, still purring. "It's alright, Dustystorm. You can say her name."

Dustystorm sighed as he shook his head. "I know..." he breathed. "I just wanted to play it safe, just in case..."

I continued to purr as I put the tip of my tail on the younger tom's shoulder. "I completely understand. I appreciate it," I reassured him.

I then felt a wave of pride and happiness run through me as I looked back at the sandy-gray tom. "You're such a kindhearted tom, Dustystorm," I meowed, giving him a small nudge on the shoulder. "My daughter is incredibly lucky to have you."

I pulled away to see Dustystorm's pale blue eyes glowing with gratitude. "Thank you, Lilypetal," he purred. "I'm incredibly lucky to have her. She's the most amazing she-cat I've ever met." Dustystorm's eyes had been glowing with love and affection as he spoke. So, I was confused to suddenly see his gaze darken. "Which is why I hate to see her so troubled."

So Thornclaw and I aren't the only ones who've been worried, I realized thankfully, looking back on Goldenshine's strange behavior in the nursery the night that Mistpelt passed. "You've noticed it too?" I asked Dustystorm.

The tom nodded back to me, his eyes wide and concerned. "Definitely. Something seems to be on her mind all of the time," he answered, his voice full of distress. "Understandably so, when her relationship with Swiftflight is so strained."

I sniffed as I shook my head. *Oh, you don't even know half of it,* I told Dustystorm in my thoughts. He had no idea that Swiftflight was training in the Dark Forest, or that Ashfur was the one training him, as far as I knew.

"And I don't use the word *strained* lightly," Dustystorm continued. "Did you know that Goldenshine went to see Breezepelt recently?"

My heart practically skipped a beat.

I stopped in my tracks as I whipped my head around to face Dustystorm again. "Went to see him?" I murmured tautly. "Breezepelt?"

At the moment, I was trying to keep myself from pelting back to camp, finding Goldenshine, grabbing her by the scruff and tossing

her in the stream if Dustystorm was seriously telling me that she was two-timing him with a WindClan tom that brought her so much strain...

I was shocked to see that Dustystorm's stance remained calm and relaxed. "To talk about Swiftflight," he replied as he also paused in his walk.

Interesting. "Did she, now?" I pressed, trying to push down the growl that was throbbing in my throat, now that Dustystorm had given a logical explanation. "How does that make you feel?"

Still surprisingly to me, Dustystorm simply shrugged, his eyes only flashing with discomfort for just a moment. "Well, no cat would like the idea of their mate going to talk to their former one, I have to admit," Dustystorm responded. "But I have to live with the fact that Breezepelt and Goldenshine share a son. She said that consulting him was all it was, and I believe her."

"I see," I murmured, shutting my eyes as relief washed over me with Dustystorm's explanation. Yes, Goldenshine had made bad choices in the past, but I could not be more certain when I said that she had learned from those choices. I sighed and met Dustystorm's gaze once again. "Do you want me to be honest?" I asked Dustystorm, my eyes narrowing.

Dustystorm's eyes then seemed to glow with more fear that they would contain if a bloodthirsty badger was standing right in front of him.

I then purred with amusement as I put the tip of my tail back on the tom's shoulder. "I believe her, too," I reassured him. *But I do still worry about her interacting with Breezepelt, though*, I realized anxiously, despite my joke. *I still remember what Leafpool said... he hasn't exactly evolved into a very warm cat...*

Dustystorm then let out a huff, letting his head fall low as he breathed, "Great StarClan, you have got to stop teasing me like that!"

I flashed the tom a half-amused, half-apologetic look before

glancing up to find that we had finally arrived at our destination. I exchanged a solemn glance with Dustystorm before padding up to the white fence. I crouched down, ready to pounce up before straightening out again and looking back. "Are you coming?" I asked the sandy tom.

Dustystorm shook his head as he sat down. "That's alright," he insisted, dipping his head to me. "I'll let you and your brother share this moment."

Without another word, I lashed my tail with appreciation, then leaped up to the top of the fence. Once I had steadied myself, I looked down at the yard to see that it was empty - not even Millie was in sight. *Thank goodness.*

Not wanting to possibly draw out a Twoleg with my voice, I simply stood and waited in silence, hoping that Oreo would decide to make his way outside sometime soon.

And StarClan was on my side today, because it felt as if it had only been a couple of moments before I recognized the black and white pelt of my brother crawling through his miniature door and leaping onto the grass. His hazel eyes widened with surprise once they fell on me.

"Lilypetal!" he exclaimed, trotting excitedly up to the fence as I leaped down. "It's been a while! Welcome back!"

"Hi, Oreo!" I purred, touching my nose to his in greeting. "It *has* been a while. I missed you!"

"And you, too!" Oreo replied as he pulled away. "What brings you here?"

And with that question, the initial excitement of seeing Oreo suddenly vanished as I remembered what I was here to do. I sat down, prompting Oreo to do the same with a flick of my tail. "Unfortunately, nothing good," I replied as my head to the ground.

I then took a deep breath, looked back up at my brother, and began to tell him everything - from the moment I had realized that

Wrenkit, Emberkit, and Lightningkit were missing (after sharing the news that I had given birth to them), all the way up to me seeing Mistpelt's head disappear beneath the water.

Oreo listened with wide eyes the entire time, his nodding head being the only indicator that he was listening. My heart then nearly broke to see his usually bright and cheerful gaze fall into darkness as I described Mistpelt's passing to him. By the time I was done, his head was lowered to the ground as he shook it slowly with his eyes screwed shut.

It was then silent for several heartbeats, and I stood patiently, keeping in mind that this news hadn't been able to settle with Oreo yet. His feelings were as fresh as mine had been when I had lied half-buried in the snow, barely being able to stand.

"I barely got to know her," Oreo finally whispered, seemingly forcing himself to lift his head up. "I can't believe that she's already gone."

"I know," I whispered in response, wrapping my tail around my brother's shoulders. I then decided to shift myself closer to him and lie my head on his shoulder for comfort.

Oreo rested his head on top of mine. "Thank you for telling me," he meowed, giving me a light nudge.

"Of course I would tell you!" I insisted, pulling my head away to look at Oreo. "You're my brother, for goodness sake!" *And I don't care about the circumstances that I found that out under. Not anymore.*

After the two of us shared a quiet laugh, I then sighed and lied my head back on Oreo's shoulder. Then, there were many more heartbeats of silence as the two of us nonverbally shared our misgivings, simply taking comfort in each other's company.

I then let out a nearly inaudible huff, narrowing my eyes and lifting my head up to the sky as a thought occurred to me. *Hm, I'm sure you're really enjoying this, aren't you?* I pressed to a certain gray-speckled tom, even though I was pretty sure I was answering my own question. After all, seeing me suffer was something I had

figured out he enjoyed, to say the least. And I'm sure he was humored about me taking comfort in my housecat-brother.

I then snorted with amusement as I thought jokingly, *I wouldn't be surprised if this was somehow your fault, you fox-heart.*

Chapter 27

[image]

Swiftflight's POV

"StarClan has certainly blessed us today!"

I simply grunted in agreement at Foxleap's comment, my mouth being too full of fresh-caught prey to reply. I then quickly shifted my gaze from the dark ginger warrior as Ivypool trotted up to flank him.

"Luckily this thaw has brought the prey back with it," the silver-and-white tabby she-cat meowed through the mouse in her jaws.

I then flicked my ears as Foxleap snorted and nodded his head towards me. "I think Swiftflight caught half of the forest!" my former mentor joked as he lashed his tail. "Having a phenomenal mentor sure pays off, doesn't it?"

I then nervously flicked my gaze over to Ivypool as I heard her sniff. "Oh, yeah," she murmured, her dark blue eyes narrowing down into slits as she slowly turned her head to look at me. "You definitely deserve to take all of the credit, Foxleap."

I wonder if anyone else could sense that menacing sarcasm in her voice... I thought nervously. I quickly turned away from the warrior to look back at the forest as a rustle came from some bushes. Just a heartbeat later, Snowstorm appeared into sight, who all of us had been waiting for as she went to retrieve her catches. She didn't look at me even once as she padded past me to stand next to Foxleap.

I let out an almost inaudible sigh as my claws sank into the ground. *Foxleap had to pick the two she-cats in this Clan that happen to hate my guts for this hunting patrol...* I thought angrily. Ivypool still hadn't seemed to get over the fact that I wouldn't spy in the Dark Forest with her. With each day I was coming to live with that more and more, despite my feelings for the she-cat.

But with Snowstorm, what was incredibly frustrating was the fact that she didn't seem to have much of a reason to be angry with me, yet she was. *She can't still be bitter over me hurting her in training, right?* I asked myself as I stared off at the white she-cat. *Well, something's wrong. She's been on my tail for moons now, for StarClan's sake!*

"Sorry for the wait," Snowstorm then meowed, interrupting my confused thoughts. "Let's go."

"Let's go, indeed," Foxleap agreed, his mouth opening into a yawn as he stretched out. "It's nearly moonhigh. We need to get some sleep."

I nodded eagerly in agreement, still not being able to speak with my full jaws. *Ashfur is surely already waiting for me,* I realized. Our small hunting patrol had gone out just as the sun was setting, and to tell the truth, it had only felt as if we'd been out for a couple of heartbeats before I could barely tell where I was placing each paw.

And soon enough, dawn would be upon us, surely. *I'm not letting myself stay awake until then!* I told myself. *My Dark Forest training has been incredibly discombobulated lately as it is. I had to miss a night because of my vigil!*

Pushing down my rising irritation, I trotted past Ivypool, Snowstorm, and Foxleap and crawled through the gorse tunnel and into camp, quickly placing my mouse, chaffinch, and shrew on top of the fresh-kill pile. I then rushed over to the warriors den and quietly made my way inside, picking one of the empty nests furthest from the center. *One of the drawbacks to being a new warrior...* I thought bitterly as I settled down.

Just a few heartbeats later, the rest of the hunting patrol arrived in the den, Snowstorm being the first one to appear into sight. We locked gazes for just a moment before the both of us almost simultaneously whipped our heads away. But I still watched out of my peripheral vision as Snowstorm padded deeper into the den, then lying down in a nest beside her former mentor, Icecloud - fairly far away from where I was.

I couldn't help but feel a small twinge of sadness. *There was once a time when Snowstorm would make sure to get the nest closest to mine so that we could whisper and gossip until one of us began to nod off,* I thought longingly for a moment before hissing and shaking my head as I lowered it. *Those days are over, and it's for the best.*

I then had to stand up and shake out my fur, almost as an attempt to shake away the tugging regret that wasn't disappearing. *It's for the best. Not just my friendship with Snowstorm, but everyone else, too,* I demanded to myself as I lied back down in my nest.

I then let out a long sigh as I closed my eyes. *I mean, look at how far you've gotten. You're a warrior now, and you're tough and strong,* I thought, my remorse slowly being replaced with pride. *I do wonder how long my training in the Dark Forest will last now that that's the case?*

A shiver then ran down my spine as another question crossed my mine. *Is Ashfur's mystery plan still in action? Does he still have something planned for me, despite all that he's done to help me?*

As I then began to be pulled away from reality and drift off into sleep, I then came to a conclusion. *Surely not.*

Not even a heartbeat later, my eyes flew open to find myself in our usual training clearing. The trees, bushes, and patches of dead grass here were almost more familiar than ThunderClan territory.

I flicked my ears, slightly confused that Ashfur wasn't standing before me as he usually was, yet his pungent scent was as strong as it could be. I narrowed my eyes as I warily turned around. I was then relieved to see that the speckled-gray warrior was simply sitting behind me, and his demeanor was not hostile.

"Hey," I meowed, sitting down and wrapping my tail around my paws.

Ashfur stood up from where he had been sitting, dipping his head to me. "Hello, Swiftflight," he replied. I then flicked my ears, surprised, as he then let out a contemptuous snort. "Hm, I still don't like saying that," the Dark Forest warrior then muttered. "Firestar could

have picked a much more intimidating name, if you ask me."

"Excuse me?" I meowed, slightly taken aback. I then shrugged as I muttered almost inaudibly, "I kind of like it..."

"Would any cat cower at the name 'Swiftflight'?" Ashfur hissed, his eyes blaring as he looked back at me. "It's too dainty, for my liking."

I sniffed with amusement as I stood up. "I'm sorry, would you have liked me to go up to Firestar before my warrior ceremony and request to be named 'Swiftmurderer'?" I meowed sarcastically.

I then watched as Ashfur's blue eyes narrowed down into slits. "Sure," he replied in a weirdly calm voice. "You can manipulate any cat into anything if you go about it the right way." He then stood up and took a step closer to me. "You've got a bit of an attitude tonight... More than usual," he then murmured, a small growl beginning to rumble in his throat. "What's that about?"

I sank my claws into the ground, fighting my impulses with all of my might in order not to take a step back. I hated the fact that Ashfur still managed to intimidate me despite me being a full-grown cat, a warrior, but unfortunately there wasn't much I could do about it.

Correction - there wasn't anything I could do about it.

I made sure that I was standing straight with my head held high as I replied to my Dark Forest mentor, but my voice still shook slightly. "A-attitude? Well, I-"

I then cut off my own words, a bit startled by a sudden rustle from some brambles behind me. Ashfur and I exchanged a quick glance before looking back towards where the sound had come from.

"Who's there?" Ashfur called out, brushing past me as he padded towards the brambles. "Tigerstar? Hawkfrost?"

No reply. I narrowed my eyes as I stared off at the spot, feeling more curious than nervous at all. *Strange...* I thought. *Aside from Tigerstar stopping by periodically, we never usually see any other signs of cats.*

After a few moments of waiting for some response, Ashfur then let out an annoyed huff, lashed his tail, and then turned around to face me again. "Probably some new mouse-brained trainee that's lost their way," the gray warrior muttered.

"Probably. Anyway," I meowed, the mysterious noise from the bushes actually giving me some time to gain my composure. "I don't understand why you'd be so upset about some attitude, Ashfur," I murmured slyly as I narrowed my eyes. "I'd think that you'd want me to be assertive to some extent. How else would I be able to subdue others and be a powerful warrior?"

Ashfur let out another snort as he sat down in front of me. "Being a powerful warrior is one thing, questioning my word is another," he muttered, flashing me what looked like a warning look. Before I could come up with some sort of reply, he stood up again and began pacing. "But you're right, Swiftflight. That's certainly something that you've learned in your time here. I'm very proud."

"Thank you," I replied, not being able to help feeling a bit of pride at the praise.

"You've learned to do what is right, and what is best for you, even when those pesky Clanmates of yours try to get in your way... even when they try to talk you out of it," Ashfur continued. He then paused, whipping his head around so that his gaze could burn into mine. "Right?"

I felt a prick of nerves for just a moment as I thought about the context behind Ashfur's words. *Is he referring to when Jayfeather tried to talk to me out in the forest?*

I quickly nodded my head. "Of course," I replied. "I-It's all... it's all been worth it." I then took a deep breath, trying to collect my thoughts. "T-the resignation, the toughness, the separation from Clanmates who veered me off course. All worth it."

"I am so glad you think so," Ashfur purred menacingly as he gave me a slow, single nod. He then shook out his fur and began to pad to his usual spot just a few tail-lengths from me in order to begin our training. "Anyway-"

I then lashed my tail, slightly stunned again as another rustle came from some bushes nearby - this time, much, much closer. *What in the name of StarClan...?*

Ashfur hissed as he whipped himself in the direction of the sound once again. "For the love of..." he muttered, then calling out, "Whoever is wandering about, I suggest that you leave before you lose an ear!"

I snorted to myself as I licked a paw and ran it over one of my ears. *I can say with complete certainty that that won't be hard to arrange...*

I then instinctively stood up as yet another rustle came from up ahead, this time, I actually got to witness the slight shiver of the bramble thorns as they were shifted. These brambles were just about a foxlength from where Ashfur was standing.

I quickly trotted up and stood next to my Dark Forest mentor, ready to confront this cat who clearly was hesitant to show themselves. *What cat would even be wandering around the Dark Forest alone?*

Ashfur and I then both took a step back, making room as a figure actually began to emerge from the bushes. I took a quick glance at my Dark Forest mentor, and was utterly surprised to see that his eyes revealed at least a bit of alarm and worry. And to be honest, I had to try for a moment to hold in a purr of amusement. *Who could possibly come out of these bushes that you'd be afraid of?* I asked the gray-speckled tom in my mind.

I then returned my gaze to the cluster of bushes, my heart feeling like it was drowning to the very depths of the deepest body of water as I processed what was in front of me.

Snowstorm, my Clanmate and former best friend, had emerged from the bushes, and was standing before me and Ashfur, her white fur bristled slightly, and her blue eyes blazing as she stared right into my fur.

"S-Snowstorm," I breathed, never feeling so at a loss for words. "W-What..." *Why in the name of everything that makes sense are you here?*

I then backed away just a pawstep as Ashfur shouldered his way past me and stood almost nose to nose with Snowstorm. "What are *you* doing here?" he hissed at the white-she cat, almost as if he knew her or why she might be here.

I was then even more surprised, if that was even possible right now, to see Snowstorm's eyes flash with bewilderment as she looked back at Ashfur. "You!" she growled, her fur bristling out even more as she stepped back. "I know you!"

What?! I thought with complete astonishment. *How could Snowstorm have ever seen Ashfur before? She was never alive when he was!* Now I wanted to know more than anything what the she-cat meant, but I was cut off by another hiss from Ashfur.

"Nonsense!" Ashfur barked back at Snowstorm. "Go away. You shouldn't be here."

Snowstorm didn't hesitate to reply. "I'm sorry," she murmured, her gaze solemn as she stared back at the older tom. "Unfortunately for you, it is my destiny to be here."

Without waiting for any response from Ashfur, Snowstorm shouldered him aside as she ran up to me. Now, her blue eyes were blaring with a mix of anger and concern. "Swiftflight, what in the name of StarClan are you doing in the *Dark Forest?*"

Still feeling completely thrown by this situation that was unfolding, the only thing that I could think to do was answer honestly. "I-I've been training here since I was a kit," I explained, then taking a deep breath and returning Snowstorm's hard stare. I didn't need to be ashamed of what I was telling her. "And it's only been to my benefit. I've learned so much, Snowstorm. What do you mean, 'what am I doing here'?"

Snowstorm then let out a half-surprised, half-taunting gasp. "Oh, *have* you now?" she hissed, her claws unsheathing and digging into the ground. "Is that why you got to fight in the ShadowClan battle a quarter moon into your apprenticeship? Why you were considered being made a warrior so early?"

All true. Nothing wrong with it. "Yes!" I exclaimed as I felt my fur begin to bristle.

"That on its own is fine; nothing wrong with getting ahead," Snowstorm murmured patronizingly before nodding her head towards Ashfur. "But I can't even begin to fathom why you would train with... with him! This tom has brought harm to so many cats - primarily *your family!*" She then whipped her gaze back towards me, and I could barely stand to look at her eyes that practically looked like blue fire. "Are you out of your mind?"

A growl was rumbling in my throat as I advanced on Snowstorm. "Of course not!" I roared back to her. I then took another deep breath, attempting to lower my voice to a level that only Snowstorm would hear. "But even if I didn't want to be here, there's nothing I could do about it. Ashfur has threatened me several times, so backing out is out of the question, even if I've wanted to leave a few times..."

"Then why haven't you, Swiftflight?" Snowstorm demanded sharply, her eyes narrowing.

"*What?!* What did I just tell you?" I hissed back to Snowstorm. "Listen, if I leave or try to fight anything that he says, I could be putting myself in danger, don't you understand that?" I then rose my voice even more, hoping to redeem myself from what Ashfur had likely just heard. "I've just had to work not to tread on his paws and listen to what he tells me. But even so, I've come so far!"

I then flicked my ears, flustered as Snowstorm let out another hiss and slashed at the ground with an unsheathed paw. "Are you kidding me?" she growled, her eyes blazing like they never had before. "So far in which direction, Swiftflight? Is all of this why you've grown to be such a closed-off cat? Antagonizing your friends and family for no reason? Why you're always so aggressive and so selfish?"

"Selfish?" I repeated, my eyes widening.

"Yes, selfish!" Snowstorm barked back, not seeming to care that Ashfur was just a few tail-lengths away. "Even if it was all just for

your own safety originally, it's clearly not just an act anymore - it's who you've become."

I opened my mouth to speak, but nothing would come out.

But even if my voice box had been working, I don't think Snowstorm would have given me the time of day. She began pacing as she went on. "This isn't you, Swiftflight. I know it isn't. If you truly cared about being the best warrior you can be, you wouldn't stand for any of this." She then flicked her tail towards Ashfur, who was staring back at her with his blue eyes full of malice. "You're just letting yourself fall into this fox-heart's plan if you're doing everything that he says. I don't care if he's dangerous - a true warrior would fight against anything that pulled them away from who they truly are."

As my gaze fell to the ground and my mind tried to grasp Snowstorm's words, I heard Ashfur let out a purr of amusement. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see him slowly approaching Snowstorm. "Hm, pulling out some of that old medicine cat wisdom, I see," he taunted as his claws slowly slid out from his paws.

My head immediately shot back up at these words. *Medicine cat wisdom? How does he know about that?* My heart was beating so incredibly quickly as I met Ashfur's gaze. He took a step towards me, briefly nodding to Snowstorm.

"Come on, Swiftflight. She's clearly talking nonsense," the gray-speckled warrior insisted. "You aren't going to fall for this weak warrior's words, are you?"

As Ashfur took another step towards me, I actually found myself taking a step back this time. "This is just the beginning, it doesn't matter that you're a warrior now," he meowed in an ominously optimistic tone. "You've become so tough, resilient, and strong. Why would you want to stop now?"

A shiver ran down my spine as my gaze locked with my mentor's. The gleam of a want for vengeance had never been so clear in his blue eyes.

"Remember what Tigerstar once told you," Ashfur went on, his expression looking more demented and crazed with each word he said, "All of the exhaustion, all of the adversity and struggle is worth what you'll become one day. Have you forgotten that?"

"Stop it!" Snowstorm yowled, pushing the Dark Forest warrior aside. "You've already manipulated and corrupted him enough. Where does it end?"

I was sure that my heartbeat could be heard at this point as Ashfur then turned on Snowstorm, his fur bristling as he crouched down low, seemingly ready to pounce. "Well... I certainly know that I've found a hindrance to that end..."

I then had to suppress a terrified yelp as Ashfur leaped at Snowstorm, immediately being able to pin her to the ground as he sank his large claws into her shoulders. Snowstorm let out a pained yelp before slashing a claw across Ashfur's muzzle.

I backed away as I simply watched in fear. My legs were shaking so much that I thought I was going to fall over. The blood was roaring in my ears. I was obviously in a situation where action should be taken, but I couldn't bring myself to take even one pawstep.

It seemed to be an infinite amount of moons that Ashfur and Snowstorm were wrestling in the clearing. Snowstorm already had some deep gashes along her flank and shoulders, and blood was dripping from the scratch that Snowstorm had given Ashfur across his face.

Eventually, Ashfur managed to pin Snowstorm down once again, and she was weakly thrashing and trying to claw at him under his grip. I then nearly lost my breath as Ashfur whipped his head towards me.

"What are you waiting for, Swiftflight?" Ashfur called out to me, his eyes blaring with malevolence and determination. "She's already as weak as a newborn kit. She's not going to win."

You're right. She won't win. There's no way.

I felt as if I was being physically torn in half by two hungry foxes. The cat that I had trusted as my mentor since I was a young kit was about to kill a cat that had been by my side since the first day she had arrived in ThunderClan.

I then watched as Ashfur lifted one of his unsheathed paws that was now covered in blood. He had Snowstorm fastened to the ground. I knew what he was about to do, and there was going to be nothing that the white she-cat could do about it. *It's hopeless for her, now.*

At this sight, I suddenly felt a certain fire, a surge of determination bubble up inside of me unlike anything I had ever felt before. A growl was rising in my throat, my claws were slowly sliding out, and my lips were curling back into a snarl. I had never been so sure about what I had to do.

I crouched down and took a step back, then leaping forward with my claws outstretched. *It's about time I put this cat in their place!*

Just a heartbeat later, claws met fur, and my sight was just a blur of fur until I managed to pin down my opponent. "You're not laying another whisker on that cat!" I hissed to them.

Beneath my grip, Ashfur's eyes were two blue flames. "What is wrong with you?" the gray tom roared to me as he began to claw at my face. "You've really lost your mind now!"

"That's a whole load of mouse-droppings, and you know it! My mind is more clear now than it has ever been," I growled back to Ashfur, digging my claws deeper into his shoulders. As quickly as I could, I then whipped my head around to look at Snowstorm, who was struggling to stand up. "Snowstorm, run! Get out of here, now!"

I then turned back to look down at Ashfur, and for the first time, the sight of the Dark Forest cat brought me a surge of anger. I had been too blind see it, even through all of the signs, through all of the things my Clanmates had been trying to tell me, but this sick, evil, fox-hearted tom had taken so much from me.

Ashfur's manipulation had caused me to miss out on innumerous things, things that now would make my heart ache just thinking

about them - my friendships had vanished into nothing, my Clanmates' trust in me was surely plummeting, and worst of all, I had completely lost any relationship I had with Goldenshine, my own mother.

And all of these supposed "advantages" had been nothing but a disadvantage for me. As Jayfeather had tried to tell me, my Dark Forest training had gone far beyond fighting moves, and based on the cat I had turned into, that wasn't good at all. I didn't think that I would never know the full extent of Ashfur's plan for me, but I could be sure that part of it was to groom me to be a bloodthirsty, unfeeling, and hard-hearted cat that would bring harm to its Clanmates. And up until this point, he had completely succeeded.

But no more. I didn't want this any longer - I never did. This sick, *horrible* manipulation I had been under since I was just three moons old wasn't going to continue. Not if I could help it.

I then suppressed a hiss as Ashfur slashed his claws across my chest. "You mouse-hearted, mouse-brained little-"

Feeling another aggressive surge of tenacity, I ignored the immense pain I was feeling and swiped my claws across Ashfur's face. "That's mouse-brained to you!" *Snowstorm is right. You've not only harmed me, but you've threatened so many cats, you nearly killed Thornclaw, and you did kill Snowflight! And you attempted to terminate Lilypetal's kits, for StarClan's sake!*

I couldn't help but feel accomplished as I heard his screech of pain. *He deserves at least a little of it after all he has put me through.*

I then bent down to hiss in the warrior's ear. "Sorry that I couldn't become the sadistic, heartless warrior that you wanted me to be," I growled to Ashfur as I sunk my claws deeper into his shoulders. "Like you."

Then, as quickly as I could, I leaped off of him, immediately turning away to see that to my fear, Snowstorm had barely moved from her spot.

I urgently ran up to the she-cat, making sidelong glances towards

Ashfur to make sure that he himself was still struggling. "What in the name of StarClan are you doing?" I demanded to Snowstorm as I began to nose her up. "Come on! We have to go!"

My tail twitched anxiously as I watched Snowstorm struggle to her paws. She stood for just a heartbeat, catching her breath before looking up at me. Her eyes were glittered with pain as she nodded to me, but thank StarClan, she then began to pelt away from the clearing.

I followed her, making sure she was far enough from the clearing before I whipped myself around to face Ashfur once again. I had managed to stun and weaken my former Dark Forest mentor, for he was still working to heave himself from the ground. He feebly lifted his head up to look at me, the rage in his gaze clear even through the pain.

"I'm done training with you, or with anyone!" I spit back at him. "From now on, you're going to leave me alone!" *And even if you try to bring me back here, I'm just going to continue to run.*

I then reared on the Dark Forest warrior once again, using all of my strength to catch up to Snowstorm, who had actually managed to pick up lots of speed. "Find another weak cat to corrupt. It's not me, anymore!" was the last thing I said to Ashfur before bursting into a run and sprinting side by side with Snowstorm. I didn't know in the slightest where we were going, and I was sure Snowstorm didn't either, but the further we were from Ashfur was all that mattered.

As we both ran, I slightly turned my head towards Snowstorm to see that she was looking back at me, her blue eyes glimmering with so much pride and approval.

I couldn't help but snort with amusement. *She's never going to let me live out the fact that her words got to me*, I thought jokingly. *Why she was even here to say them to me, I have no idea. I'll find that out later.*

I then gasped with alarm as a ripple, almost like a small blue wave, ran through Snowstorm. As I continued to look into her eyes, I noticed that for just a heartbeat, they looked just as striking and blue as ice. It was all so short-lived, that once it vanished I

wondered that if it had even happened. But honestly, after everything that had happened tonight, nothing was surprising me anymore.

As Snowstorm and I continued to run deeper and deeper into this unknown territory, I soon was able to realize that the trees, bushes... everything around us was beginning to disappear. By the look on Snowstorm's face, I could tell that she was seeing it too. We were waking up.

Soon enough, even Snowstorm and my own body were turning into nothingness. I truthfully had never been so ready to return to reality.

As all of my surroundings then went away, Snowstorm's words, began to echo inside of my head. *A true warrior would fight against anything that pulled them away from who they truly are.*

I knew now that all of what I was went far beyond being skilled in hunting and fighting. Nearly my entire life, I had been told that being vulnerable and feeling was weak. Friendships, relationships of any kind, would only be an impediment to my growth. When, in reality, that is what was going to help me.

I mean, companionship is the heart of every Clan, isn't it? I've always been too oblivious to see that, I realized, never having felt more disappointed in myself than I was now. *I now have something else that I should submit to without question, and it's not Ashfur - it's to ThunderClan, to Firestar and Brambleclaw, Goldenshine, Snowstorm, Ivypool... every one of my Clanmates. And I'm going to integrate my hunting and fighting skills to protect and defend every single one of them.*

As everything then completely went to black, I felt released, and more at ease than I had ever been. *It's going to be tough at first... but I'm ready to start over. This is where my journey as a warrior really begins.*

Chapter 28

[image]

Goldenshine's POV

The first thing I saw as I opened my eyes was the soft sunlight of dawn that was just barely leaking through the den walls. The warriors den was completely silent except for the snores and stirs of some of the other sleeping cats nearby.

I slowly stood up and shook out my fur, knowing that as much as some more sleep would be nice, I wanted to get started on training with Cherrypaw as soon as possible. *Sorreltail always got me up at the crack of dawn, and it sure didn't do me any harm!* I thought humoredly.

I let out a long, quiet sigh as I looked down at Dustystorm, whose eyes were closed, but the quicker, shallower rises and falls of his flank revealed that I had woken him up.

I sniffed, shaking my head slowly as I bent down to nuzzle my mate's cheek. "Sorry for waking you, sweetheart," I whispered.

A purr was rumbling in Dustystorm's throat as he shifted his head and opened a single eye. "How do you not know that what you just said could have been the cause of me waking up?"

I rolled my eyes and snorted. "And hedgehogs fly," I replied, lightly brushing a tuft of moss that was on Dustystorm's head. I then licked his cheek before standing up straight once again. "Get some more sleep. I'll see you later."

"You don't have to tell me twice," Dustystorm purred, shifting himself and closing his eyes.

I stared lovingly down at my mate for a moment before padding ahead, crawling through the den entrance and out into the camp clearing.

I immediately veered towards the apprentices den, and peered inside once I had made my way to the entrance. To my complete amusement, Cherrypaw was standing up in her nest, her tail twitching eagerly as if she had been waiting for me.

I let out a quiet *mrrow* of laughter as I beckoned the ginger tabby she-cat outside with my tail. "Someone is ready for training this morning!" I purred.

"And I'll never be anything less!" Cherrypaw exclaimed, lightly nudging me on the shoulder. "What are we doing today?"

I pretended to contemplate the question for a few heartbeats. "Hm... I think I'll keep that to myself," I teased, not being able to keep the laughter out of my voice.

"Goldenshine!" Cherrypaw begged, her amber eyes glittering with curiosity and excitement.

"Alright, alright," I conceded, flicking Cherrypaw's ear with my tail. I then winked as I murmured, "I think it's about time that someone began to learn some battle moves..."

Cherrypaw then gasped, her eyes growing wide. "Really? Oh my StarClan!"

"'Oh my StarClan' is right!" I purred. "I'm thinking I'll-"

"Goldenshine!"

I raised my eyebrows, realizing that my words had been cut off by a voice behind me. I exchanged a half-amused, half-intrigued glance with Cherrypaw before looking behind me.

And to my complete shock, the only other cat that was in my sight was Swiftflight as he crawled out of the warriors den. His gray-blue eyes widened as we locked gazes, but he proceeded to approach. "Goldenshine..." he breathed, sitting down just a tail-length from where Cherrypaw and I stood.

Beside me, Cherrypaw's tail was beginning to twitch as she shifted her paws back and forth. "Hi, Swiftflight," she meowed shyly.

To my surprise, Swiftflight flashed my apprentice a warm look as he nodded to her. "Hi, Cherrypaw," he murmured, then shifting his gaze to look at me once again. "Um... I hate to delay this training session..."

Well, you are, I thought bitterly, my eyes narrowing as I watched my son hesitate.

Swiftflight's gaze fell to the ground for just a moment, before seemingly forcing himself to look at me again. "But I need to talk to you," he meowed firmly.

My heart immediately began to beat faster. I was almost sure that I was imagining what Swiftflight had just said. "*Talk* to me?" I repeated, my voice shaking slightly.

Swiftflight gave me a single slow nod, his gaze unreadable, as usual. "Please," he replied simply.

As perplexed and dumbfounded as I suddenly felt, I couldn't help but also feel a twinge of excitement. Unless the grief of practically losing Swiftflight was so great that I was now hallucinating, it appeared that he was wanting to actually speak with me. *And I wouldn't care if he was going to tell me something as pointless and meaningless as him finding a thorn in his nest...*

So, I nodded quickly and eagerly to my son. "Okay. Um..." I then turned to Cherrypaw, who I assumed couldn't be apart of what Swiftflight had to say. "Cherrypaw, how about you have a go at a hunt while Swiftflight and I talk? We'll just be a little ways behind you."

To my relief, Cherrypaw immediately nodded. "Hunting on my own? Of course!" The younger she-cat then quickly turned around and trotted towards the camp entrance. "I'll make sure that you don't regret this!" she called back. "I'm going to catch something for you, trust me!"

I watched Cherrypaw's ginger tail disappear through the gorse tunnel, sniffing, before glancing back at Swiftflight. The dark gray tom had been following my gaze, his eyes glittering with humor as

he stared back at where Cherrypaw had vanished. I nodded to him, simply lashing my tail as a signal to follow.

The two of us padded in silence until we had fully exited the camp. But once the stone hollow was out of sight, the anticipation was already killing me. Swiftflight wanted to talk to me. Swiftflight wanted to *talk* to *me*. The thought was giving me an emotion I couldn't even describe.

I felt so nervous that I almost thought I was going to have to run to the dirtplace, yet my head was light with happiness. But also, I was still overwhelmed with betrayal and anger every time I looked at Swiftflight. The fact that it had taken him this long to initiate something infuriated me, in a sense.

I slowed my pace, turning my head to look at my son. "So, you wanted to talk," I began, shaking my head slowly. "This ought to be good, considering you're actually putting forth some effort. Unfortunately that's been quite the rare feat for the past six moons."

Next to me, Swiftflight slowly shut his eyes as he let out a huff. "Goldenshine..." he breathed.

But he trailed off as I fell into my blind rant. "Not talking to me was one thing," I went on, "but you went so far as to claw at me for attempting to get a word out of you. You look at me as if I'm a decomposing frog full of maggots..." I then screwed my eyes shut, a fresh wave of pain rushing through me as I recalled what I had been through.

But unfortunately you're going to have to let it go for just a moment so that you can let your son talk... I told myself as I opened my eyes again. "So *what,* Swiftflight?" I whispered to him, my voice thick with hurt. "What could you possibly have to talk to me about? What do you have to say?"

I looked back at Swiftflight to meet a very soft, clear set of gray-blue eyes as he stared back at me. A look I hadn't seen in the tom since he'd been a kit in the nursery.

"I'm sorry," Swiftlight murmured.

My heart practically skipped a beat. I continued to wonder if my mind was playing tricks on me. "W-what?" I whispered, my legs beginning to shake.

"I said that I'm sorry," Swiftflight meowed a little more loudly, but it had sounded as if it'd been harder to get the words out. He then shut his eyes tightly, his voice taut as he then muttered, "I'm... I'm really, really sorry."

"You..." I whispered, my eyes narrowing down into slits. "You're sorry?"

"Yes," Swiftflight replied, his voice even tighter than before as his gaze fell to the ground.

It was then that I began to doubt my son's sincerity. Him spitting hatred at me for so long now seemed as if it came more easily to him than this. As horrible as it sounded, him pulling my tail would make more sense to me than receiving a genuine apology from him.

"It sure seems like it," I muttered sarcastically, beginning to walk ahead of Swiftflight so that I could avoid any further suffering. "I'm going to catch up to Cherrypaw."

To my surprise, I heard the sound of Swiftflight's distressed hiss come from behind me. "No, mother, wait!" he called out to me. He then appeared at my side once again as he whispered, "Please."

I stopped in my tracks, forcing myself to look at Swiftflight again. "You called me mother..." I breathed, my heart warming even by a gesture as simple as that.

After I watched Swiftflight hesitate for a few heartbeats, he flashed me a warm look as he dipped his head. "Of course," he replied. And after yet another few moments, he spoke again. "Listen, Goldenshine, you're not wrong in saying that talking to you is something I have failed to do for the past six moons..." He then paused, taking a deep breath. "Among many, many other things. I genuinely... genuinely want to apologize for it."

And I genuinely want to forgive you, I really do, but... But I wondered

if Swiftflight truly understood the gravitas of this situation he had put us in. "Swiftflight... as much as I want to take it, I don't think that 'sorry' can even *begin* to cover what you've put me through."

Swiftflight then screwed his eyes shut again as he shook his head slowly. "I know, but..." He then trailed off, second-guessing his words yet again. "I'm sorry," he then meowed, and I wondered if I had really heard the hint of desperation in his voice.

So, I had to test him further. "How am I supposed to know if you're sincere?" I pressed, stepping to the side so that our fur brushed. "How do I know that your 'sorry' really is genuine?"

Swiftflight let out a huff as he continued to shake his head. "Look, you have all the right not to believe me, and I'm fully aware that I haven't seemed very convincing, trust me, but..." I then watched as my son closed his eyes once last time, his eyebrows furrowing as well.

I then flicked my ears in complete surprise as he then let out a frustrated hiss after several heartbeats. His eyes were full of sadness and regret as he opened them again. "Great StarClan, I treated you like absolute crowfood. You're right - I didn't talk to you. I hurt you in so many ways... and you didn't deserve even a sliver of it."

I simply stared back at Swiftflight in awe as he spoke. He truly had never seemed more vulnerable or more guilty, even more so than when he had been a kit. *And not to mention, I don't think I've ever heard him say so many things at once...*

"What kind of son am I?" Swiftflight went on, a growl rising in his throat. "And what was worse, was that everything I did was intentional... I was completely aware of it." He then sighed before meowing, "Oh, Goldenshine, I'm sorry. I understand if you want to give me everything that I put you through in return."

I purred with amusement, looking affectionately back at my son as my heart steadily grew warmer and warmer with each word Swiftflight had said. "That's a pretty big statement to make," I teased to him, nudging his shoulder with mine.

Swiftflight shrugged, shaking his head. "I don't see how anything else could make up for this," he meowed in a voice just barely above a whisper."

I had heard and seen enough. I had never been so happy to give in to a cat's words. "Oh, Swiftflight," I breathed, touching my muzzle to my son's head. "You've already done more than enough."

For many heartbeats, the two of us stayed just like that. I couldn't even remember the last time that Swiftflight had even let me touch him. But that didn't matter anymore; I had never wanted to be in the present moment more than now.

But eventually, I pulled away as a question crossed my mind. "I have to ask..." I began hesitantly. "What in the name of StarClan brought you to do all of this intentionally?"

I flicked my ears as Swiftflight snorted. "I think you'd honestly want things to go back to the way they were if I tell you," he meowed, his voice surprisingly resentful.

I shook my head quickly, flicking Swiftflight's ear with my tail. "Not possible," I insisted to him.

"It definitely is possible," Swiftflight muttered.

"Swiftflight, spill."

Swiftflight sighed, speaking after he seemed to try and get his thoughts together. "StarClan grant I don't regret this..." he breathed, sitting down. "But trust me, Goldenshine. I'd expect you to not react very well of me telling you that..."

I sat down as well, wrapping my tail around my paws as I nervously waited for Swiftflight to speak.

"...that I've been training in the Dark Forest since I was a kit," Swiftflight confessed. And as I felt my mouth drop, he took a deep breath and whispered, "and with Ashfur, too."

As if I already couldn't be more bewildered and taken aback by the prospect of my son training with evil cats, hearing the name of that

horrible, speckled-gray tom nearly sent me over the edge. "Yeah, yeah, the demented tom that you were fully aware that *I* killed because *he* murdered my sister," I exclaimed, not being able to keep my voice even. "Swiftflight, what were you thinking?"

Swiftflight's gaze reflected the immense shame that I felt. "That's the thing - I wasn't," he replied simply. "Not at all."

I snorted in response. "You've got that right."

"Can you blame me?" Swiftflight demanded, his voice raising as he began to pace around the area. "I was a three moon-old kit already eager to be a warrior. When this seasoned, tough-looking warrior approaches you and offers to train you so early, it's hard to resist." My son then rolled his eyes, sitting down once again. "And I didn't."

"Apparently not," I murmured, not being able to help feeling extremely disappointed in response to what I was hearing. I then flicked my ears, certain memories that had caused me so much distress as a new mother beginning to resurface.

"Wait a moment... three moons..." I then muttered. "...Also the time that you began to seem exhausted all of the time, become more cranky... and get those mysterious scratches..." I then turned to meet Swiftflight's gaze once again. "Is that..."

Swiftflight simply nodded, his gaze solemn. "Yes."

The shock I was experiencing was becoming so consistent that I was beginning to practically feel numb. "Swiftflight, I've always thought of you as quite intelligent - a logical thinker with a good head on your shoulders," I meowed, my eyes burning into my son. "With that in mind... you clearly saw how this training was negatively affecting you... so why didn't you leave?"

Swiftflight shrugged as he shook his head. It almost looked as if he had asked himself that same question many times. "Because I learned. I still received the training," he replied. "Yes, I knew that Ashfur was a dangerous cat that had brought so much harm to the cats that I cared about... but he and Tigerstar-"

"Tigerstar, too? What a riot!"

"They got to my head," Swiftflight continued despite my begrudging comment. "They always did. Ashfur always did." He then took a deep breath, his gaze growing dark. "At least, until last night, he did."

My heartbeat doubled once again, the underlying meaning behind my son's words for some reason giving me an ominous feeling. "W-what happened last night?" I pressed, praying to StarClan that Swiftflight would actually answer me.

And thank all of the spirits above, he did. "I can hardly believe it, but..." Swiftflight began as he shook his head slowly. "Ashfur and I were about to train, and... Snowstorm appeared out of nowhere."

At the mention of the white she-cat, I found myself falling completely speechless.

Swiftflight seemed to try to search my gaze for a moment before going on. "Um... and to make a long story short," he explained, "she opened my eyes. She pulled me out of this trap I was under. I'm never, ever going back there."

Swiftflight then seemed to get caught up in his own recollection of last night, as he wasn't acknowledging the fact that I hadn't said one word in many heartbeats. "But I don't understand in the slightest how, or why Snowstorm was there in the first place," Swiftflight murmured, half to himself. "She's always seemed to have one eye on me for moons now, but how could she know..." He then trailed off, and out of the corner of my eye I could see that he had turned to look at me. "...Goldenshine?"

I didn't directly reply to my son. I couldn't, for there was only one thing, one goal on my mind at the moment. I lifted my head up from where it had been facing the ground, and called out into the forest. "Cherrypaw! Are you out there?"

I then stood and waited for a response in silence, trying to ignore Swiftflight's confused, concerned gaze burning into my fur. Luckily, just heartbeats later, Cherrypaw's tabby pelt emerged from some

bushes. She happily trotted up to Swiftflight and I, her head tilted to the side, and a small thrush in her jaws.

"Hey, Goldenshine! Swiftflight!" Cherrypaw squealed through her full mouth as she flicked her gaze back and forth, resting longer on Swiftflight each time. "Look at what I caught!"

I tried to snap myself out of my daze to give my apprentice the praise that she deserved. "That's amazing, Cherrypaw. Wonderful job," I replied cheerfully, then furrowing my eyebrows as I tried to think on my paws. "Um... Swiftflight?"

Swiftflight flicked his ears and turned to me from where he had been staring admirably at Cherrypaw. He simply nodded to prompt me to go on.

"Could you possibly start Cherrypaw's training for me?" I asked my son. "Just teach her the most simple fighting move you know."

Swiftflight exchanged a puzzled glance with Cherrypaw, who seemed to be pushing down her excitement, before replying. "Um... sure," he answered, one of his eyebrows raising. "But why?"

I pushed down my growing frustration, not wanting to have to give any sort of explanation at all. "I... I need to talk to someone. I'll be back soon," I briefed, then taking a step closer to Swiftflight so that I could whisper in his ear. "Meet me by the nursery at sunhigh. We have much to discuss."

I pulled away to find that Swiftflight seemed to partly understand, thank StarClan. "Okay," he whispered back, giving me a quick nod before turning to face Cherrypaw. "I guess I'm your mentor this morning."

I gave Swiftflight a quick lick on the cheek, and then Cherrypaw a flick on the ear before beginning to quickly walk away. "You two have fun!" I called back, glancing over my shoulder to see that Cherrypaw was hopping up and down as Swiftflight walked beside her, his eyes bright. I then shook my head quickly and cleared my throat. "Um, I mean, good luck!"

Even though I know that Cherrypaw likes Swiftflight, I certainly wasn't intentially trying to get them to spend time together, however... I then shook my head again, bringing myself back into focus as I broke into a run. *That's another piece of prey that we don't have time to catch right now.*

Once I arrived to the gorse tunnel, I practically slid through it, and then basically flew through camp I made my way to the medicine den. I then nearly slipped as I skidded to a halt at the entrance and leaped inside.

"Jayfeather!" I exclaimed, trotting through the bramble screen. "Oh my StarClan, Jayfeather."

Jayfeather, who thankfully was alone in the medicine den for the moment, only slightly turned his head towards me. "That is my name," he muttered.

I let out a huff of annoyance. "Not funny," I replied. "I need to talk to you. Now."

Jayfeather basically imitated my annoyed huff as he dropped his herbs and completely turned around to face me. "And I'd like to continue with the task at hand, but that's not happening right now, is it?"

"Jayfeather, please," I demanded, the desperation clear in my own voice.

The medicine cat then sighed, closing his blind eyes for just a moment as he beckoned me with his tail. "Fine, come in," he murmured. "What's going on?"

"What's going on?" I repeated as I sat down in front of Jayfeather. "Well, I found out how much of a *coward* you are, for one, but I'll rip your fur off about that another time."

"Excuse me?" Jayfeather hissed in reply. "Coward?"

I snorted. "Yes, I'd like to think that you holding back the fact that my son is training in the Dark Forest is pretty cowardly," I answered sarcastically. *Now I understand why Jayfeather was suddenly so*

hesitant to reveal all that he knew to me, I realized to myself. *Did he think he was seriously sparing me by doing that?*

I then forced that anger and bitterness away for the time being. "Anyway, that's not why I'm here," I continued, lowering my voice and taking a step closer to Jayfeather. "You were right."

Jayfeather sniffed after seemingly processing my words for a few heartbeats. "I'm always right," he muttered only half-jokingly. "But what are you specifically referring to?"

"Snowflight's destiny, you mouse-brain!"

Those words seemed to completely pull Jayfeather in. The irritation was suddenly wiped off of his face, and replaced with concern and awe. "How was I right?" he asked.

I suddenly found myself having to contain my excitement from getting to transfer all that Swiftflight had just told me to Jayfeather. "Snowstorm went to see Swiftflight in the Dark Forest last night. She talked to him. She pulled him out. Swiftflight was training with Ashfur, and she got him away from that fox-heart. Jayfeather, this explains everything!" I meowed happily as I began to pace around the den. "You had said that Snowflight had come back to stop Ashfur based on our dreams – Well, Snowstorm confronted Ashfur, and got Swiftflight away from him. She stopped him from going through with whatever ill will I'm sure he had towards Swiftflight. But..."

I then paused in my own words, my own explanation causing a question to occur to me. "...Something I wonder about is how she was so sure of what she was doing in the first place?"

As I looked back at Jayfeather, I tried to stifle a purr of amusement as he seemed to desperately be taking in every word I had just told him. After many heartbeats, he finally replied, "Goldenshine, you're assuming that you and I are the only two cats having had dreams about this. Snowstorm was surely having them as well."

"Whoa..." I breathed. *That explains so much... the way that she stared at him after that Clan meeting, how wary she's acted about being around*

him lately.

Another wave of joy then rushed through me as everything began to process. "Jayfeather, then Snowflight has fulfilled what she's meant to do!" I exclaimed. "After all of this time, we finally did it! We figured it out!" I then took another step closer to Jayfeather and tilted my head as I asked, "Right?"

"I... I don't see any reason why we'd be wrong," Jayfeather replied, his eyes actually reflecting my own enthusiasm, slightly. "This appears to be the path that StarClan has laid out for her."

"And Snowstorm did it all on her own," I breathed, suddenly feeling an overwhelming amount of relief and love for my sister. "Snowflight, she... she saved my son. Snowstorm has no idea how much she has done..."

I then turned back to Jayfeather, flashing him an inquisitive look even though he wasn't going to see it. "So... what now?" I asked the medicine cat. "What does this mean for her?"

Jayfeather's eyes continued to sparkle with wonder and amazement as he answered. "If Snowstorm has truly fulfilled Snowflight's destiny, then Snowflight's spirit will be freed. She would return to StarClan."

StarClan! And maybe she'd be able to visit us again! "How would we know if Snowflight has been released?" I pressed further. "Would Snowstorm show any sort of sign? I-"

I then cut off my own words, realizing that Jayfeather had begun to tap my shoulder with his tail. I glanced confusedly at him before following his blind gaze to the front of the den.

Snowstorm was standing at the entrance, her blue eyes narrowed as her head tilted to the side.

I was almost completely sure that she had heard me say her name. "Oh... hi, Snowstorm," I meowed casually, attempting to play it off.

"Did you need something?" Jayfeather asked, standing up.

Snowstorm stared at the two of us for a painfully long moment before replying. "Um... I do, actually. Could I have a couple of poppy seeds? Or maybe feverfew would be better," she answered, clearly trying to grasp at her own memory. "I'm extremely sore, and unfortunately I don't think I'll be able to withstand it on my own."

I turned anxiously to look at Jayfeather, who for some reason did not show any signs that he had heard Snowstorm for quite a while. He simply stared back at her, his blind eyes narrowed slits. It had seemed like an eternity before he turned around and began to dig through his herbs.

"I'll give you some feverfew," he murmured, then picking up the herb and dropping it at Snowstorm's paws. "You're right - feverfew would be best for soreness."

Snowstorm gave a brief nod before bending down to pick up the herbs in her jaws. "Thank you, Jayfeather," she meowed, flashing me an incredibly brief concerned look before turning and leaving the den.

Jayfeather was simply standing in the same place, staring off at the place that Snowstorm had disappeared as if he could see. I knew that Snowflight, let alone Snowstorm, clearly was one of few that could put the medicine cat in a daze, but the darkness that I saw in the medicine cat's eyes concerned me, to say the least.

So, I gave Jayfeather a nudge on the shoulder in an attempt to get him to snap out of it. "What?" I demanded to him.

"Snowflight..." Jayfeather breathed after a moment. "She hasn't been released yet."

My eyes instantly grew so large that I thought they were going to fall out of their sockets. "What?!" I exclaimed out of complete shock. "Could you tell just based off of her herb knowledge? That's nothing new!"

Jayfeather rolled his eyes beside me. "Oh, sure!" he replied sarcastically. "If Purdy came in right now and began meowing on about herbs, I could be sure that Snowflight was lingering about in

there, too!"

"Jayfeather..." I sighed as I shook my head slowly.

Jayfeather completely turned towards me, and I met his grave gaze. "Goldenshine, I knew that Snowflight was in there then, and I know that she still is now," he meowed firmly, then returning his gaze to the entrance of the medicine den. "There is still more for her to do."

A shiver ran down my spine at those words. "More?" I repeated. "What more could she have to do?"

"Something that clearly goes beyond just saving a single cat from going down the wrong path," Jayfeather answered as he stared off at the same place. "Your sister's destiny, I can tell, is much bigger."

Chapter 29

[image]

Lilypetal's POV

The sky was a clear, radiant blue with the arriving sunhigh as I trotted through the ThunderClan camp, my heart growing an extra size with each excited squeal I heard from the three little furballs on my back.

"Faster, mother!" Emberkit squeaked, padding forward so that she was nearly standing on my head. "Faster, faster, please!"

"Thornclaw always goes really fast when he gives us badger rides!" Lightningkit purred.

"Really, *really* fast!" Wrenkit agreed with his brother.

I narrowed my eyes and smirked as I looked back at my kits. "Thornclaw goes really, really fast, huh?" I questioned to my kits, meowing loudly enough to where the golden tabby tom, who happened to just be arriving back from a hunting patrol, was in earshot.

I then turned my head back to look at my mate, who had begun to pad towards the nursery with a thrush in his jaws. "Thornclaw has clearly been setting some very low standards," I meowed, my voice full of laughter. And after Thornclaw rolled his eyes towards me, his gaze full of affection, I crouched down low. "Because I am going to go really, really, really fast!"

Lightningkit, Wrenkit, and Emberkit then let out startled squeals as I practically leaped forward. But almost immediately, their screeches turned into purrs and squeals of excitement as I pelted around camp. I kept my eyes forward and focused to make sure that I wouldn't crash into anything or anyone while I was running so freely.

I then found myself feeling a rush of adrenaline and happiness as I lapped around the camp a second time. After all, it hadn't been until recently that I'd actually been able to put in so much energy to play with my kits. All I'd been able to do was sit in the same spot and play mossball, or possibly play hide-and-seek if I had enough energy to move around.

But now, I can play tag, mock-battle, give them badger rides... whatever! I thought joyfully. I then purred with amusement as I briefly glanced back at my three purring kits. *Although, I feel like I could occupy them with badger rides alone until they're apprenticed...*

After a few more full-circles around the camp, I finally slowed my pace and crawled back into the nursery. I was actually panting a little as I crouched down to let Wrenkit, Emberkit and Lightningkit off. The three of them let out disappointed groans as I did so.

"Aw, is it over?" Lightningkit sighed as he rolled back onto the ground.

"We were having so much fun!" Emberkit then mewed, gracefully leaping and landing on the soft nursery ground. "Why did you have to stop, mother?"

"Mother's tired," I breathed as I bent down to nuzzle Emberkit's head. My ears then pricked as I shifted my gaze to find that Thornclaw had just sat down in our nest and was setting down the thrush he had caught.

I couldn't help but lick my lips. *And mother's hungry.*

I then excitedly padded up to join Thornclaw at our nest. But before digging in, I knew that I needed to greet my best friend first. A purr began to rumble in my throat as I bent forward to touch my muzzle to Thornclaw's. "Hi, there," I meowed softly. "How was the hunting patrol?"

I felt Thornclaw twin his tail with mine as I pulled away and met his pale blue gaze. "It was really, really, really great," he answered to me. I then sniffed as he put his muzzle up to my ear. "Just like I'm really, really, really fast with badger rides."

I then rolled my eyes and shook my head as Thornclaw pulled away, and I met his mischievous, smug-looking gaze. "You're going to look like a turtle to those three once I've given them their next badger ride," he teased to me, his eyes glittering.

I returned the expression that Thornclaw was giving me as I tilted my head to the side. "Well, you see, that can't happen," I meowed mockingly, "because I've already made you look like a snail."

The two of us then burst into laughter, and I felt my heart nearly melt as our gazes locked once again. Feeling a wave of affection and love, I leaned forward once again and nuzzled my head into Thornclaw's chest fur. "Hey, Thornclaw, guess what?" I murmured to him.

"What, Lilypetal?" he replied as he set his muzzle on my head.

"I kind of like you. Don't tell anyone."

Thornclaw chuckled as I lifted my head to meet his gaze. "Oh, you do? Thank StarClan," he purred, winking at me. "Because I kind of like you, too."

The two of us then exchanged another purr of amusement as we both settled down to share our thrush. "Hm, I don't know," Thornclaw then meowed as he licked my cheek. "I may like you a lot. Don't tell anyone."

Just as I flashed my mate a loving look and was beginning to reply, I was then startled by sudden movement at the entrance of the nursery. I turned to see that it was my firstborn daughter, Goldenshine, making her way in.

"Hi there, Goldenshine!" I purred to my daughter. I then nearly gasped with shock as a certain dark gray tom arrived just behind her. "-and Swiftflight?"

I exchanged an utterly bewildered glance with Thornclaw at this sight. I had known that the mother and son had been on incredibly hostile terms for the past few moons now, so to say the least, this was quite the sight to behold. *So much so that the joy of it is*

overshadowed!

And what made things even stranger was the fact that when I looked back at Goldenshine, her expression was hard and solemn. "Hi," she replied simply, then turning to look towards where Daisy, Ferncloud and the newly-arrived queen Sorreltail were settled in their nests. "Ferncloud, Sorreltail, Daisy - Swiftflight and I need to steal Lilypetal and Thornclaw away for a bit." She then briefly nodded over to where Emberkit, Lightningkit, and Wrenkit were now playing mossball. "Do you mind watching those three for a little while?"

I stared at Goldenshine, shocked and confused as she awaited an answer from the queens. I was already wondering why in the name of StarClan Goldenshine hadn't even bothered to ask if Thornclaw and I could talk or afford to leave the kits. *This must be important,* I realized, a shiver running down my spine. *Goldenshine is a stubborn and assertive she-cat, but she's usually more thoughtful than this.*

I then glanced over just in time to see all three queens nod eagerly, although I could just slightly see the gleam of concern in all of their eyes. "Of, course," Daisy replied, dipping her head. "Take all of the time you need."

Without another word, Goldenshine then whipped herself around and left the den, and Swiftflight followed right on her tail. Thornclaw and I stood up as we exchanged another puzzled glance. I then flashed it over to Swiftflight, who had glanced back at the two of us as we left the nursery.

Swiftflight shrugged as he met my gaze. "Hey, I'm just as confused as you are," he admitted, shaking his head slowly before looking ahead at Goldenshine. "Where are we going?"

Goldenshine didn't look back as she entered the gorse tunnel. "Just outside of camp," she answered. "We all have a lot to talk about."

My heart skipped a beat at my daughter's words. For all I knew, she could be implying anything. What in Silverpelt could this possibly be about?

All four of us then walked in silence as we traveled deeper in the forest, our minds all probably buzzing with anticipation as we awaited the discussion ahead. My heart began to race as Goldenshine then paused and settled down once we arrived at a small clearing. Her gaze then fell on me, Thornclaw, and then Swiftflight as she lashed her tail towards the grassy forest floor. "Sit," she commanded.

"Of course, O great one," Thornclaw muttered justly loudly enough for me to hear as he lowered his haunches. Then, more loudly, he meowed, "Goldenshine, what is all of this about?"

I nodded eagerly towards Goldenshine, prompting her to answer the question.

Goldenshine's stance, which had been quite tense since we'd left camp, finally seemed to relax once she started speaking. "Well, to sum it all up..." she began, her gaze flitting around so that she could look at Thornclaw, Swiftflight, and me all at once. It then stopped on her son. "Thanks to Swiftflight, I've realized that there's a lot that I've been oblivious to in the recent moons."

I couldn't help but sniff at Goldenshine's words. "Goldenshine, I'd hardly call you oblivious."

To my surprise, I saw Swiftflight shaking his head on my other side. "No, I'd say she was pretty oblivious," he replied as he turned to look at Thornclaw and me, his gray-blue eyes dark. "And as far as I know, you all are too."

Oblivious? Of what? My heart began to beat even faster than it had been before. "What do you mean?" I pressed to the young warrior.

My eyes then flew back to Goldenshine, who was padding up to sit closer to us. "Snowstorm," she answered as she settled back down.

Swiftflight's gaze then seemed to flash with surprise at that response. "Snowstorm?" he exclaimed. "Weren't we here to talk about-"

Goldenshine then flashed her son a hard stare, one that certainly

would shut me up if it'd been directed towards me. "We'll get to that later. We must discuss this," she muttered tautly to Swiftflight, then nodding her head to each cat in front of her. "You all have been unaware for long enough."

I was practically feeling antsy with anticipation as Swiftflight spoke again. The dark gray tom's eyes were wide. "Unaware about Snowstorm?" he questioned. "Even me?"

Goldenshine gave a curt nod to her son. "Especially you."

Swiftflight's eyes seemed to stretch even wider. "Beyond what happened last night?" the tom pressed.

"That doesn't even begin to scratch the surface. You still don't even understand why she was there!"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Thornclaw then meowed, raising his tail in the air almost as if to ask for silence. "We're going to need to pull back a few pawsteps."

"I second that," I insisted, almost purring with amusement out of the confusion of this situation. "Goldenshine, are you referring to the fact that Snowstorm carries Snowflight's spirit? I remember that you and Jayfeather revealed that to me some moons ago." I then glanced back and Thornclaw and nodded to him. "And then I told you."

"Snowflight?" Swiftflight then exclaimed. I turned back towards him to see that his eyes had managed to stretch even wider. "Your sister? The... the one that Ashfur killed?"

Goldenshine's eyes flashed with grief for just a moment as she nodded. "Yes."

I myself found that I had to ruthlessly push down a wave of sadness. *No matter how much time goes by, I know that the pain I experienced from losing my daughter will never fully heal.*

Swiftflight however, had never known Snowflight. The news that Goldenshine had just revealed to him seemed to mentally bowl him over. "That explains so much..." he breathed.

I raised my eyebrows at those words. "What do you mean, Swiftflight?"

Swiftflight didn't reply immediately, He simply stood in place, his mouth half-open as his head shook slowly. "Snowstorm... she always seemed to know so much about the ways of a medicine cat, and I could never understand why," he finally answered. "But now... wow..."

I exchanged a mystified glance with my kin as I nodded to him. "Snowstorm definitely carries many of Snowflight's qualities, and her knowledge..." I then trailed off as I looked back at Goldenshine, my eyes narrowing. "Does it go beyond that?"

Goldenshine's eyes now seemed to glitter with awe as she gave me a single nod. "Beyond anything you could imagine," she answered ominously. "Jayfeather and I have been looking into it for moons and moons now - wondering why Snowflight could have possible returned. We've both had dreams, but they were all so vague..." Goldenshine then shifted her gaze to look at Swiftflight. "...but we have managed to solve a piece of it. Are you comfortable sharing what happened?"

Swiftflight let out an exhausted huff beside me. "It's sure going to take a lot of explaining..." he conceded.

"We've got time," Thornclaw then meowed, his pale blue eyes narrowing down into slits.

Swiftflight nodded back to the golden tabby warrior. "A piece of this, you already know," Swiftflight began. "Um... well, I've been training in the Dark Forest for moons, but just last night, Snowstorm appeared there as well."

Goldenshine then interrupted what Swiftflight had been about to say with a gasp as her gaze flew towards Thornclaw. "Whoa, what?" she exclaimed. "You're training in the Dark Forest, too?" My daughter then looked at me, her eyes full of shock and shame as she seemed to be asking me what her father had been thinking.

But out of shame and regret I'm sure, Thornclaw wasn't ready to

discuss that. "Not anymore," he answered firmly before nodding sharply to Swiftflight. "Go on."

Swiftflight hesitantly complied. "Well, as I said... Snowstorm appeared, and she tried to convince me to leave, so I did," he explained. "I've... I'd been having doubts for a while, but she opened my eyes.

"You finally saw sense," Thornclaw murmured, his head nodding slowly as his eyes glowed with admiration.

"Thank StarClan for that," Swiftflight muttered. "It's pretty unfortunate that it took some help for that to happen..."

Throughout this entire conversation, my head had been nodding as I processed each new piece of information. And Swiftflight's latest statement had solidified what I had suspected. "Some 'help' was what was supposed to happen..." I whispered half to myself. I then lifted my head to meet Goldenshine's serious gaze. "Snowflight was meant to help Swiftflight, wasn't she?"

Goldenshine's eyes remained dark as she answered. "Yes, but... according to Jayfeather, Snowflight hasn't been released from Snowstorm's body yet."

Those words sent a chill down my spine.

"There's more for her to do," Goldenshine went on, "and we have no idea what."

"Snowstorm pulling me out of the Dark Forest wasn't enough?" Swiftflight then asked as his tail began to twitch anxiously.

Goldenshine simply shrugged as she let out a huff. "Apparently not."

What could possibly be so big for my daughter to do that she'd be separated from StarClan for so long? "My goodness. That's... scary," I then breathed out loud. "Is there any way we can find out what *is* enough - what Snowflight is meant to do?"

"Great StarClan, I wish," Goldenshine muttered as she lifted her gaze from the ground. "But now that we're all aware, we can all

keep one eye open."

All of us then exchanged glances as we nodded in agreement. It was Swiftflight's sniff that broke the silence a few heartbeats later.

"I'm still trying to process the fact that I'm best friends with your sister," the tom breathed as she stared blankly ahead.

"Swiftflight, I must ask... even though I can most certainly take a guess," Thornclaw began after we all purred with amusement. "Why would Snowflight even need to save your fur in the first place?"

Another moment of silence then fell on the four of us. Yet another shiver creeped up my back as I realized that *all* of us likely knew the answer, not just Thornclaw.

And sure enough, Swiftflight's answer confirmed what I, myself knew. "Because Ashfur was my mentor..." Swiftflight murmured quietly, his gaze falling to the ground in humiliation.

I nodded, flashing Swiftflight a sympathetic, but cold glance. "Oh, I've known that for a while," I meowed, trying to push down the sudden anger that was trying to sneak up on me. "That fox-heart decided that it would be fun to provoke me by paying me a visit and letting me look in on one of your training sessions when you were just a kit."

I then nearly cringed back as Goldenshine let out an infuriated hiss, and her gray eyes suddenly turned to dark-gray flames. "You've known?" she growled to me through gritted teeth. She then whipped her head to look at Thornclaw. "And you did too? You both have known that Ashfur was training my son? You didn't say a word?"

I stood up and took a step closer to my daughter despite the hostile energy she was now exuberating. "Goldenshine, we thought that you knew-"

"So what?" Goldenshine spat at me, cutting me off. "Why didn't you say anything? Why didn't you say anything to Swiftflight, at least?" Goldenshine's gaze then went to Thornclaw once again. "You were

in the Dark Forest, apparently! Why didn't you keep him out of there?"

Silence then fell on the group again as Thornclaw and I exchanged a nervous glance. We both had known the answer for a while, and had been able to do nothing but live with it because of the circumstances that the knowledge was under.

After flashing Thornclaw a look of apprehension, I then forced myself to look at Goldenshine's blazing gaze once again. "We couldn't," I answered to her, before beginning to explain the horrible reality that Thornclaw and I had been facing for many moons now. We told her everything, from the moment that Ashfur had revealed he was training Swiftflight, to the threat Ashfur had given me - saying that he'd kill Swiftflight if I tried to say anything to him, all the way to the night that Thornclaw had nearly been killed for trying to help Swiftflight.

Swiftflight's astounded gaze was the first piece of feedback I received after I'd finished talking. "What?!" the dark gray warrior exclaimed. He then took a step back, stared at the ground for a moment, and then shook his head before he repeated, "*What?!*"

"Swiftflight, more words, please," Goldenshine muttered to her son.

Swiftflight's eyes were now blazing just as his mother's had. "So that trap that the piece of crowfood held me under was all because of his grudge on Lilypetal?" she hissed through gritted teeth.

"Trap?" I repeated, perplexed by my kin's words. "What trap?"

Swiftflight began to pace the area. "The night after the ShadowClan battle, I was in the Dark Forest, alone," he began to explain. "I tried to find Ashfur, and ended up overhearing some Dark Forest cats speaking with each other. They were talking about me, trying to decide what they wanted to do with me - if they wanted to continue to train me, or..." Swiftflight then paused for a moment as a shiver seemed to escape him. "I had wondered why they had such ill intent with me over the other trainees, but it all makes sense now."

I nodded grimly in response to Swiftflight's words as they processed.

Continuing to push down my anger, I meowed evenly, "It... it was all a part of Ashfur's plan."

Thornclaw, seeming to sense the dejection and rage that was bubbling up inside of me, shifted himself closer so that our flanks were pressed together. "A continuation of his revenge," he murmured as he then wrapped his tail around my back. "All because you exposed him for who he really was."

"I can't believe it," Goldenshine sighed, finally sitting back down. "The last that I'd seen of the mouse-brain was when I killed him. I assumed that he had gone to the Dark Forest and begun to mind his own business."

Swiftflight was shaking his head, as if he was still trying to process all of this information. "Hold on, that's why he put me through all of this?" he questioned, his voice rising with complete shock and infuriation. "Why he pretty much held me captive in the Dark Forest and practically forced me to turn away from my Clanmates?"

He then whipped his gaze around to look at the three other cats, his eyes wide. "All because of a grudge for something that *needed* to be done?"

I simply sighed as I continued to shake my head. This reality that Swiftflight was just now learning, was what I had unfortunately had to live with for many, many moons now. "Pretty sick, isn't it?" I meowed.

Beside me, I could feel Thornclaw's fur beginning to bristle, and his muscles were beginning to tense. "He's killed Snowflight, he tried to kill me, and he manipulated Swiftflight until it was almost too late. It took Snowstorm for *that* to end." My mate's meow was incredibly taut, as if he was doing everything in his power not to explode.

"And he also-"

I looked at Swiftflight as he had begun to speak, but was suspicious to see that the tom's eyes were now wide as the fur along his spine began to rise. He clearly hadn't meant to speak, but now it was too late.

Goldenshine clearly noticed this too. She took a step closer to her son, her eyes narrowed. "He also what?" she muttered, her teeth bared.

Swiftflight simply stood, his eyes wide and his mouth open, but no words were coming out.

I myself stood up and got closer to Swiftflight. I suddenly found myself growing incredibly nervous. Swiftflight had been training with Ashfur since he was a kit, and it was likely that he knew a lot about the gray-speckled tom than we did, but the fact that he couldn't share this piece was very, very unnerving.

"What, Swiftflight?" I prompted to the warrior, my eyes narrowing as well. "In a discussion about Ashfur, nothing can be left unsaid."

There were many moments that went by where Thornclaw, Goldenshine and I simply gave Swiftflight a hard stare as he seemed to internally refuse to speak. But thank StarClan, he eventually let out a long sigh, like he was giving in.

"He tried to kill your kits," he meowed sadly, flashing Thornclaw and me a sympathetic look. "But thanks to Mistpelt, he didn't succeed."

As one would guess, a reveal like that would send me over the edge, to say the least.

A wave as full of water as what was contained in the lake rushed through me in the form of absolute rage. "*What?!*" I roared, slashing at the grass with an unsheathed claw. "That fox-heart was the one that led them away from camp?"

Swiftflight's expression was alarmed as he quickly nodded. "That's what he told me."

The tom's shock almost angered me further. Why would he be shocked by how upset this made me? "And you didn't say anything?" I growled to Swiftflight.

Swiftflight stood his ground, but before he could say anything, I felt fur brush against mine, and I turned my head to meet Thornclaw's

gaze. My mate's eyes were filled with as much anger as I felt, but it was clear he was trying to stay calm.

He used his tail to push my haunches down. "As much as it would have been nice to know that information much, much earlier," Thornclaw muttered, flashing Swiftflight a harsh glance, "Lilypetal, don't forget - Swiftflight has been forced to do nothing but follow Ashfur's orders for moons now. He probably *couldn't* say anything."

I snorted with contempt. "Oh, thanks. That makes me feel better," I hissed mockingly. But almost immediately after, I realized how extremely unfair I was being. Yes, I had a right to be angry, but I had no right to take it out on any of these cats.

I closed my eyes and tried to release some of my tension through a sigh. "Great StarClan, I'm sorry, Swiftflight. It's not your fault. I just..."

My attempt at a state of "calm" didn't last long, as I was overtaken with another bout of rage as I began to pace. "How much is this horrible lump of fur going to attempt to take away from me?" Then, almost as if the second wave had exhausted my physical body, I sat in my place, suddenly feeling very emotionally drained.

But one feeling was left - determination. I narrowed my eyes as I lifted my head up. "Clearly, Ashfur is much stronger and more dangerous than we could have ever imagined."

Swiftflight nodded, his demeanor still slightly tense from my interrogation against him. "And he's clearly not done with what he's seeking to do. And now that I've left the Dark Forest, he'll need to look for something else to make that happen."

"And that can definitely be arranged," Thornclaw continued firmly. He then seemed to exchange a nervous glance with Swiftflight as he murmured, "Ashfur's not the only one we should be worried about."

Goldenshine shifted uncomfortably as she seemed to understand Thornclaw's implication. "The Dark Forest?" she questioned, her gray eyes widening.

Thornclaw gave a single, slow nod. "Precisely."

I tried to distract myself from my continuous feelings of fury by focusing on the present topic, but my legs still shook. "You have definitely alluded to something," I meowed to Thornclaw, flashing him an anxious glance. "You know that they're up to something - but you have no idea what?"

Thornclaw's eyes then seemed to cloud with regret. "I left before I could even find out," my mate admitted. "Now I'm wondering if that was the right thing to do. I could have found out something."

To my surprise. Swiftflight snorted in response to those words. "Believe me, that's covered," he muttered, and before any cat could ask what in the name of StarClan he had meant by that, the dark warrior continued. "But I understand, Thornclaw. That's occurred to me, too."

"Thornclaw, I had no idea that you were even ever training in the Dark Forest until now," Goldenshine then meowed as she stared wide-eyed at her father.

My mate then exchanged a half-amused, half-solemn glance with me before looking back at Goldenshine. "I was only doing it to protect ThunderClan, and the cats I care about," he explained, then glancing at me once more. "But it definitely caused its fair share of problems." Thornclaw then looked back at Goldenshine. "Do you remember all those moons ago, Swiftflight wasn't even born yet - and Lilypetal and I didn't speak to each other at all?"

Goldenshine sniffed as she nodded. "I could never forget," she replied sadly. "What of it?"

"Well, that's when Thornclaw had revealed to me that he was training in the Dark Forest," I explained. Then, as Thornclaw flanked me once more and nuzzled my cheek affectionately, I murmured humoredly, "I... didn't take it well."

"As you shouldn't have," Thornclaw insisted as he pulled his muzzle away.

"Wow..." Goldenshine breathed after a few heartbeats, nudging Swiftflight with her shoulder. "The Dark Forest sure does cause its fair share of family conflict, huh?"

It was then, for the first time since this meeting, that the four of us were able to share a laugh.

"Well, you were right, Goldenshine," I breathed once the laughter had died down. "There were certainly a lot of secrets swirling around, weren't there?" I then shook out my fur and I stood up straight. "Ones that helped us all realize what we're up against."

"Which is a heck of a lot," Thornclaw muttered.

After we all exchanged nervous glances, Swiftflight broke the silence once again. "...What do we do?" His meow was as calm as it could be, yet the fear the tom was feeling was clear.

"What can we do?" Goldenshine sighed. "StarClan only knows what the Dark Forest is up to, and with Ashfur... I mean, he's a spirit - that's his advantage. He can do whatever he likes up there, and there's nothing we can do about it-"

"-that we know of," I immediately cut in.

As I expected with my bold statement, the three other cats in the clearing turned to look at me, their eyes wide and curious.

The strength of will was continuing to rise inside of me as I spoke. "We don't know what to do now, and while that isn't satisfactory for me, and I'm sure it isn't for any of you, either - we have to do what we can," I meowed firmly. "As crazy as it sounds, maybe the situation with the Dark Forest will bring a solution to what I'm facing with Ashfur."

"We."

I flashed Goldenshine a confused look. What she had said made no sense. "What?"

Goldenshine stood up and padded forward to stand right in front of me, her eyes glowing with determination. "What *we're* facing,

Lilypetal."

"This is not something that you're going to endure alone," Thornclaw insisted as he tried to meet my gaze. "Now that we know just how much Ashfur is capable of, we're not letting you face it by yourself."

I glanced at Thornclaw, and then Goldenshine as my heart began to well up with so much affection and love. On my other side, Swiftflight simply stared back at me, certainty in his gaze as he nodded.

I truly had never felt so much gratitude for my family in that moment. "I... thank you all," I breathed. I then took a deep breath, having to push my gratitude aside for the moment. "I have to admit, the help is needed, as much as I wish that you all didn't have to be involved at all. This is all because of something that I did..."

I then shook my head quickly, almost as if to rid of my immense guilt for the moment. "But I know of one thing we all need to do - we cannot hide things from each other anymore, whether we originally meant to or not." I then let my eyes rest on Swiftflight, Goldenshine, and Thornclaw for a few heartbeats each. "We're in this together. Okay?"

"Yes, we are," Thornclaw immediately agreed. "No more secrets."

"No more secrets," Goldenshine repeated, giving one sharp nod of her head.

"No more secrets," Swiftflight murmured. But he then took a deep breath before repeating his words more loudly and clearly. "No more secrets."

It was then that we all nonverbally decided that our discussion had ended. All four of us almost synchronously stood up and nodded to each other before beginning to pad in the direction of camp.

But I stayed right where I was. I wasn't ready to go back.

Thornclaw paused in his travels after only a few pawsteps once he noticed that I hadn't moved. His pale blue eyes glowed with

concern as he returned to my side. "Hey, are you coming?" my mate asked, touching his muzzle to my cheek. "I know that there's a lot on your mind, but maybe being back at camp with the kits will distract you?" He then gave me a light nudge. "You could give them another really, really, really fast badger ride. Maybe one faster than mine!"

I let out a weak purr of amusement at Thornclaw's words, and I gave him an appreciative lick on the cheek. "As lovely as that would be, I think I definitely need to take some time to clear my head," I admitted to the golden tabby tom.

"I completely understand," Thornclaw meowed softly as he touched his muzzle to my head. "Take all of the time you need. Come and get me if you'd like company."

"Thank you, my love," I purred, drinking in Thornclaw's scent for just a moment before he pulled away and continued his travel towards camp. I watched him as he flashed me a sympathetic, loving look, before pelting off into the forest.

Once my mate was out of sight, I then let out a long, exhausted sigh. I felt eerily calm as I stood up and began to wander aimlessly through the forest. This meeting that Goldenshine had convened had been needed - secrets had been revealed, problems had been laid out, but unfortunately, no solutions.

Only fear and anger had resulted. Typically these feelings didn't affect me now - Ashfur had truly done that much damage, that I was beginning to feel numb with each new blow.

But this was different. Goldenshine's meeting, and what I had found out through it, had brought me to my threshold. I was more angry than I had ever been in my life, but with each wave of anger that arrived, that water of anger almost seemed to fizz out into sheer resoluteness. I was ready to take on whatever it took to rid of Ashfur once and for all.

And when the fox-heart decided to pay me a visit on my walk, these feelings carried on. Ashfur's blue eyes glowed with maliciousness and an eerie satisfaction as I watched him emerge through some

brambles.

At the sight of him, a growl immediately began to rumble in my throat. "You!" I growled, feeling overwhelmed with rage once again.

I instinctively unsheathed my claws and leaped at Ashfur. *You good-for-nothing piece of crowfood!* I cursed to the Dark Forest warrior. *Maybe all of your plans can be thrown away if I just kill you right now!*

But unfortunately, as I leaped through the air, claws outstretched, I found myself bowling over into the ground. I could hear Ashfur's sickening chuckle as I spat dirt and grass out of my mouth and stood up. I glared back at the tom, now just being able to realize that he was nearly transparent. *He's a spirit. I can't touch him.*

I unsheathed my claws and dug them into the ground, a growl flowing through my bared teeth as Ashfur padded up to me. "That was a nice leap," he meowed mockingly as he licked a paw and drew it over his ear. "All you need is a small, fluffy tail, and WindClan might mistake you for a large rabbit."

"I wouldn't exactly want to be making jokes right now, if I were you," I muttered tautly, Ashfur's teasing only making my fur bristle more.

Ashfur purred with amusement. "What would it cost me? You're not able to lay a whisker on me even if you want to," he meowed with a malicious smile on his face. "Me, however... that's certainly been a different story, hasn't it?"

"And all because I told the truth all those moons ago," I meowed, my voice no more than a breathy whisper. I then raised it as I continued, knowing that showing any vulnerability with this cat was dangerous. "Pretty darn sad that you couldn't accept that truth." *Resulting in you killing my daughter, manipulating Goldenshine's son into submission, and... trying to kill my kits, and that took away my mother instead...*

These thoughts only enraged myself more. "Where does it end?" I then yowled to Ashfur, my voice cracking with emotion.

Ashfur's smug expression didn't go away. "Until I am satisfied."

"And when will that be?" I pressed, my head now spiraling so much that I was sure I was going insane with grief and rage. "No, I'm seriously asking. I mean, a couple of your attempts to hurt me have failed!"

Ashfur was clearly trying to hide it, but I had seen the brief look of annoyance and regret in his eyes. So, I mocked him further. "Swiftflight, your little pawn that you tried to turn into a clone of you, realized what a piece of foxdung you are-"

"Piece of foxdung?" Ashfur murmured calmly as he examined his claws. "That's a new one..."

"Shut up," I hissed back to him. *You're going to hear my words, whether you like it or not. I don't care if I look like a mouse-brain.* "You lost Swiftflight, and Snowflight - the cat that you killed, was the one who saved him. You're not as powerful as you think. I may not know how to stop you now, but-"

"-and you never will!" Ashfur roared back to me, his blue eyes now wide and blazing with vexation. "Sure, pieces of my plan have been... altered, but they haven't ended."

Ashfur then took a step closer to me, his eyes narrowing. "Your little family of yours was on to something, I'll say that. What I have planned definitely goes beyond my revenge on you. Fortunately for these four Clans around the lake, there's more cats than just me who have unfinished business; something to prove," he continued, each word becoming sharper the more he spoke. "I don't need Swiftflight anymore - Snowstorm can steal him away all she wants to. What's coming next is much better than simply harming your kin."

Ashfur then took another step forward so that we were almost muzzle to muzzle. "What's coming next is going to bring you and those you care about suffering like you've never imagined."

I stood up straight and didn't avert my gaze. I sank my claws into the earth so that I wouldn't shift at all. It was what I knew I needed

to do.

Ashfur's words to me just now probably would have sent cats running with their fur fluffed out to twice their size. But me? No. I had endured too much of this. I had suffered for far too long.

I wasn't scared anymore. The end of this struggle wasn't over - but I was more than ready to start working towards it. It was all that I could do now. Ashfur had taken, and had tried to take, many things that I cared about, but I had to ruthlessly protect what was left.

I nodded slowly at Ashfur as my hazel eyes narrowed into slits. "Ah, you're going to go there. You're going to go *that* far. I see," I muttered, then beginning to walk in tight circles around Ashfur's spirit. "Well, Ashfur, if you're going to go there, I will go there, and you do not want to be there when I get there."

I then stopped walked once I stood in front of Ashfur once again. "Because when I get there, I will be so there, that you will wish that you had stayed right here."

Without waiting for any response from Ashfur, I then whipped myself around, making my way towards camp. "I'll be ready for you, Ashfur," I called back. *We'll all be ready for you, and that's a promise.*

THE END

Author's Note

What.

What?

WHAT!?!?

I cannot describe how surreal this feels! I am actually writing the closing author's note for Heart of Fire! How wild is that? WHAT!?!?!? I seriously feel like I started this book yesterday. No, seriously - I literally published the prologue yesterday!! WHAT????

ahem anyway, I'm going to refrain from pouring my heart out, but my goodness, this is crazy!

First off, I want to thank you all SO very much for all of your support on this book. Seeing the reads, votes, and comments is what further motivates me to keep this series going!

And speaking of keeping the series going...

I've already been hinting at it a lot, and the book title is already in my bio... but yes! I WILL be writing a sixth book, and I am SO pumped!

Unfortunately though, it is going to be the last one, as this story is beginning to close, and we are at the last piece of making this series a full six-book arc, which has always been my plan!

But anyway, I hope that you all know that I will still fully embrace this sixth book just as I have tried to with the other five!

As I mentioned, I already have a title for it, but I also have a cover! I think I'll keep the cover to myself for now, hehe, but I will say that the title is ***Warriors #6: A Kittypet's Destiny***. Out of my extreme excitement, I have already done a lot of planning. Let me just say - OH, BOY 😁 I cannot WAIT!

While writing Heart of Fire obviously brought me so much joy (I wouldn't have done it if it didn't!), of course, it was a bit exhausting as well, especially since my chapters have been SIGNIFICANTLY longer and writing them takes a bit more of my time. So, I hope you all understand that I need to take a bit of a break! Not just to rest and do schoolwork, of course, no way! I want to PLAN and make the sixth book as great as it can be!

My classes actually end next week, but I have final exams coming up (gross, I know), and then come December I am on break! So, I would love to get started around mid-December, and that's the plan for now!

Alrighty, sorry for non-vocally talking your ear off. That's all that I have to say! Again, I cannot thank you all enough for all of the support you've given me on this book - it makes my heart feel warm ^-^ I hope you all are looking forward to more adventures with our lovely Lilypetal, Goldenshine, and Swiftflight!

~ may StarClan light your path ~

- warriorcatlover345

(Now it's time to mark this book as complete and try not to cry 😭)

New Book!

[image]

Hello, lovely reader!

As I always do after I complete one of my books, I add on another chapter to make the NEXT book known! So, if you didn't know already, I have the Allegiances, Prologue, and Chapter 1 out for the sixth book of my fanfiction series: **Warriors #6: A Kittypet's Destiny**! If you go to read it, I really hope that you enjoy what I've got so far!

~ may StarClan light your path ~

- warriorcatlover345